



**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
COMBATING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN: FROM ISOLATED ACTIONS TO
INTEGRATED STRATEGIES**

24-25 MAY, KIEV, UKRAINE

**STATEMENT BY THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY GENERAL
ON VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN**

Marta Santos Pais

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,

It is for me a great honour to participate in this important event. I want to thank the Government of Ukraine for hosting this meeting and for placing the elimination of all forms of violence against children at the center of the agenda. I would also like to thank the Council of Europe and UNICEF for their critical leadership and the EU for its decisive support to this event.

The Government of Ukraine is to be congratulated for its decision to include the protection of children's rights as a core priority for its chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. This important decision opens strategic avenues to consolidate the safeguard of the rights of the child, and to prepare, with renewed enthusiasm and commitment, the development of the upcoming strategy of the Council for the next three years. I look forward to working closely with you and the Council of Europe in moving this process forward and in consolidating further the elimination of violence against children within the Council Strategy for 2012-2015.

The protection of children from all forms of violence lies at the heart of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols, and is an important indicator of genuine national commitment to respect the human dignity of each and every child, everywhere and at all times.

In my role as Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children, I am committed to keeping children's right to freedom from violence high in the international agenda, and to supporting national efforts for the prevention and elimination of this phenomenon.

As you know, the development **in each country** of a national comprehensive strategy has been one of the three priorities in my work – together with the introduction of an explicit national legal ban on all forms of violence against children, and the strengthening of the national data system and a research agenda on violence against children.

If violence is to be addressed in a steady and visible manner, it is critical that it is envisaged as a distinct and priority concern within the national policy agenda; and it is clearly prohibited by law for all children and in all settings. Indeed, the prevention and elimination of violence against children cannot be an accidental topic or a diluted concern that government and society as a whole feel pressed to address when some extreme incidents take place or get the attention of the media.

To effectively combat violence it is indispensable to develop a cohesive, well-coordinated and well-resourced national strategy on violence against children.

A national strategy is more than a simple document; it sets out a vision and shapes a roadmap to guide action, to secure the necessary resources and promote civil society support. To overcome fragmented and simply reactive interventions, the national strategy needs to be coordinated by a high level institution with leading responsibilities on the promotion of children's rights; an institution with the needed authority to articulate activities across governmental departments and levels of administration, to influence relevant budgetary decisions and secure the necessary human capacity, to periodically assess progress and impact achieved, and also to clarify the areas where further action is required.

Children's protection from violence can be best safeguarded holistically, through the systematic and effective involvement of all ministries – from health, education and sports, to social affairs; from justice and home affairs, to planning, economy and finance. When coordination is effective and solutions benefit from the experience and expertise of individual sectors and disciplines, convergence of actions and judicious use of resources can be promoted; isolated actions can be avoided; and sound child protection systems can be strengthened to support children and families at greater risk; and above all to prevent violence from happening in the first place.

The Policy Guidelines on Integrated National Strategies for the Protection of Children from Violence, adopted in November 2009 by the Council of Europe – with its emphasis on the adoption and implementation of integrated national strategies to ensure a comprehensive response to violence against children – provide a crucial reference for national action in these priority objectives. I am confident that this meeting will provide a sound platform to share experiences on the promotion and implementation of national strategies in countries where they have been adopted, and also to widen their development in all other remaining States.

Dear Friends,

Violence is part of daily life for many of the 150 million children in Europe. Violence, neglect, abuse and exploitation take place in all contexts, including where children are expected to enjoy a secure environment and special protection - in care institutions, in schools and also within the home.

Younger children are at special risk, having less ability to speak up and seek support, and also greater chances of suffering irreversible emotional and health damage.

Violence has serious and long lasting consequences for children's development, learning abilities and school performance. It inhibits positive relationships, provokes low self-esteem, emotional distress and depression and can lead to risk taking, self-harm and aggressive behaviour.

Violence also has very serious economic costs for society, reducing human capacity and compromising social development. As existing research confirms, responding to violence is much more costly than investing in its prevention!

This is a dimension that gains an even greater relevance in the current period of economic and financial crisis, when countries are pressed to find creative solutions to secure economic growth and employment, when the fight against child poverty and social exclusion run higher risks of being placed in a waiting slot and violence may be thought to be the least pressing of social concerns.

Thanks to important meetings as the one being held in Kiev, we are finally beginning to lift the veil of silence surrounding violence against children. But violence remains largely condoned by society, perceived as a needed form of discipline, and avoided in the public debate as a social taboo.

Violence against children is seldom reported and official statistics fail to capture its true scale and extent. Child victims feel frightened to speak up and are very often pressed to conceal incidents of violence and abuse, particularly when perpetrated by people they know and trust.

Clearly, the protection of children from all forms of violence needs to evolve from being a concern of a few into a priority for all!! And breaking the silence around incidents of violence is an essential dimension of this process of change.

To achieve it, it is imperative to secure **better information and data**. Better and accurate knowledge on violence against children enables us to address root causes of this phenomenon and identify the children at greater risk; it helps to inform effective planning, policy-making and resource mobilization. And it allows us to capture and build upon children's experience, perspectives and recommendations and to take them into account when we plan our actions and evaluate progress achieved.

A recent study by UNICEF on child disciplinary practices from 35 low and middle-income countries, among which six Council of Europe Member States (Albania, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, and Ukraine), found that some 75 per cent of children aged 2 – 14 years were subjected to violent disciplinary practices at home.

Shouting, yelling or screaming at a child are the most common practices, but in many cases other more severe forms of violence occur – including spanking, hitting and beating the child with a belt, stick or other object.

While these findings are disconcerting, the study also found that the majority of primary caregivers actually do not believe that there is a need for child rearing through violent discipline. In other words, while many caregivers resort to violence, they do not support its use.

The findings of this important study open renewed avenues to promote good parenting initiatives and help to reduce violence within the home. Indeed, evaluations of good parenting programmes have confirmed a significant prevention impact, with visible reduction in the incidence of child maltreatment, in out-of-home placement of children and also in recorded child injuries. The evaluations also showed the economic feasibility of such programmes, and the high return of invested resources many times over.

Dear Friends,

The invisibility and social acceptance of violence is closely associated with another important gap in national child protection systems - the lack of **effective and child sensitive counseling, complaint and reporting mechanisms on incidents of violence.**

Counseling, complaint and reporting mechanisms constitute critical remedies for the breach of children's rights, including violence in all its forms. Their development is required by international and regional human rights standards and, in view of their urgency, the Brazil Congress against the Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents called on their establishment, in all countries, by 2013.

The need for safe, well-publicized, confidential and accessible mechanisms for children to report incidents of violence is a priority for my mandate. As noted in my recent report to the Human Rights Council, developed with the Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, these institutions remain piecemeal, and inadequate to address children's concerns and secure their protection from violence.

Counseling, reporting and complaint mechanisms are still too often unavailable or difficult to access, particularly by vulnerable children; and when established, these services lack the needed resources and skills to provide child friendly advice and support, and to promote victims' healing and reintegration. Professionals working with and for children often lack the training and skills for early identification of incidents of violence; and even more often lack clear guidance on reporting and referral of such cases.

Children lack information about these mechanisms and feel isolated and left on their own, not knowing where to go and what to do when they endure or witness violence. Children fear public exposure, stigmatization, harassment and reprisals if they make known incidents of violence.

When they find the courage to speak up, they feel discarded rather than believed, judged rather than listened to. And above all, unsupported and deeply doubtful as to whether and how impunity can be fought.

I would like to encourage all countries participating in this important meeting to redouble their efforts in accelerating progress in the development of safe, child sensitive and effective mechanisms to address violence against children.

In conformity with widely accepted human rights standards, including the excellent Guidelines of the Council of Europe on Child Friendly Justice, some guiding principles should inform these efforts:

Firstly, it is important that these mechanisms are established by law as a core component of the child protection system and with a well-defined mandate. Secondly, they should be guided by the best interests of the child and informed by children's experience and perspectives. Thirdly, they should be well-publicized and made accessible to all children, without discrimination of any kind. And fourthly, they must guarantee children's safety, ensure confidentiality and provide prompt and speedy response and a lasting follow up.

Child-friendly mechanisms are particularly relevant for **children in institutional care**. In this region, placement in residential care remains a challenge for many children, particularly those belonging to the most vulnerable groups in society. The UN Study reported that globally, children in residential institutions may be six times as vulnerable to violence in foster care or other forms of care! This is an area where enhanced efforts are required, including to prevent separation of children from their families and their placement in residential care, and to ensure that children's care and protection are compatible with their human dignity and the safeguard of their fundamental rights.

Dear Friends,

Violence compromises the life of millions of children around the world and is associated with profound social costs. But as we have learned from the many successful initiatives promoted in the wide European region, violence is not inevitable; it can be prevented and effectively addressed. With a well-resourced national strategy, with strong and effective legislation, and with sound data and research to understand risk factors and inform policy decisions, a region without violence can be built.

As we know only too well, no policy decision is neutral to children. But with strong political will and steady action, we can build an effective and child friendly protective environment for all children, cushioning them from the risk of violence; empowering them to face their lives without fear of neglect, abuse and exploitation; and partnering with them in the building of a world where violence has no place. This is an opportunity we certainly cannot afford to miss!