



**V Cross Regional Meeting**  
**for Advancing the Protection of Children from Violence**

**Marta Santos Pais**

**Strasbourg, 18-19 June 2015**

Distinguished Guests, dear Friends

A warm welcome to you all!

I am truly delighted to join the Council of Europe in co-hosting this important meeting. Most sincere thanks to the Deputy Secretary General of the Council, Gabriela Battaini-Dragoni, and her great team for the decisive support provided to the organization of this meeting. We feel inspired by the crucial strides made by the Council of Europe over the past several decades to advance the cause of human rights and children's rights in particular. And we look forward to the opportunity of learning about the work conducted by the its human rights institutions and monitoring committees. It is a pleasure to join hands again with the Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, my dear friend Maud De Boer Buquicchio, who previously played such a leading role in the Council of Europe.

It is an honour to welcome to our meeting a distinguished group of representatives of regional organizations and institutions from around the world. Thank you for joining us in the Fifth Cross Regional Meeting on the Protection of Children from Violence. A warm welcome also to the experts joining us today from the United Nations family, national authorities and institutions, and civil society allies who have long been allies in promoting the realization of children's rights.

With such a distinguished panel of experts and participants, this meeting will no doubt reinvigorate us in our vision and deep commitment to build a world where all children, wherever they may live, may grow up happy, safe and free from fear and violence.

Dear Friends

Our meeting is held at a very auspicious moment. As you know, we are preparing the **tenth anniversary of the UN Study on Violence against Children, a landmark reference for our common cause, and very significantly, the international community is shaping a new global development agenda, which will be launched in less than 100 days.**

**Both processes are closely linked.** Freedom from violence is indispensable to sustainable development; and the new global development agenda is designed to promote human rights and dignity for all, and to free the world from poverty, hunger, disease and want, as well as from violence.

The development agenda currently being finalized expresses strong commitment to combating violence against children and women. But beyond an important political pledge, it identifies specific benchmarks to move in this direction, and includes a distinct target on ending all forms of violence, abuse and exploitation of children.

**This is a significant achievement** which will give enormous impetus to the protection of children's rights around the world and to social progress, within and across nations.

**This agenda is also a testimony of the crucial efforts that have been promoted in all regions to advance implementation of the recommendations** of the UN Study on Violence against Children. Joining hands together, over the past years we have been able to build a strong global alliance to place this concern high in the policy agenda, to raise awareness about the severe and lasting impact of children's exposure to violence, and to take tangible action towards violence prevention and elimination.

The journey ahead is certainly long, as progress so far has been slow, uneven and fragmented. But positive change is also happening! Let me illustrate with some quick examples: today, more than 90 countries around the world have a **comprehensive national action plan** addressing all forms of violence against children, in some cases integrated as a core component of the national development plan and supported by a strategic budgeting strategy. There are close to 50 countries with an explicit and comprehensive legal ban on all manifestations of violence, including corporal punishment within the home. And incrementally we see a growing number of countries undertaking national surveys to assess the magnitude and incidence of violence against children, both girls and boys children of all ages.

**Regional organizations and institutions have been vital players in this process**, promoting progress and enhancing States' accountability for children's protection from violence, and triggering the adoption of political declarations and the development of regional roadmaps, the issuance of monitoring reports and the setting up of platforms for periodic cross fertilization of experiences and review of progress. In some regions, regional strategies are currently being reviewed – including in ASEAN and in the Council of Europe – creating a unique potential to give a new impetus to the process of implementation of the Post 2015 global development agenda.

Dear Friends

**With their authority and unique influence, regional organizations and institutions will become strategic allies for the process of follow- up and review of progress** of the Post 2015 agenda and its goals and targets. This is a crucial topic that I am very much looking forward to discussing in the course of our meeting.

**Strengthening partnerships with regional organizations and institutions has been a cornerstone for my mandate, and so has been the institutionalization of cross regional collaboration and learning.**

**One strategic dimension of our work has been the organization of an annual Cross-Regional Round Table**, a pivotal platform to share and consolidate results achieved, to reflect together on trends and strategies to address persisting and emerging concerns, and to identify opportunities for influencing the policy agenda and strengthening our cooperation.

The joint statements adopted in previous years are a testimony of our shared commitment to act vigorously and with ambition to accelerate progress in children's protection from violence.

A year ago, we gathered in Jamaica to "Break the cycle of violence by investing in early childhood". This time around, we are meeting in the beautiful city of Strasbourg, to reflect on the "**Protection of Children from Sexual Violence.**"

In the course of these two days we will address the protection of children from sexual abuse in the circle of trust, the prevention of sexual exploitation associated with the use of information and communication technologies, and opportunities to strengthen international cooperation in this endeavor.

Our discussions will be framed by core international and regional standards, and in this regard we will benefit from the important work conducted by two leading Committees of the Council of Europe: the Lanzarote Committee and the Cybercrime Committee. I am confident this reflection will help to identify mutually supportive initiatives, and to strengthen implementation of the sound normative frameworks developed so far.

Dear Friends

**The topic of our meeting is a sad reminder of how distant we still are** from the ideals promoted by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and from a world where children can grow up free from violence. **Sexual violence remains pervasive, hidden and concealed.** It affects millions of children and happens in all contexts, even where children are expected to be safe and protected. But in addition, it is highly costly to society!

As we start our reflections, allow me to touch on four quick points.

**a) Sexual violence of children is a silent but pressing emergency**

Countless numbers of children experience sexual violence behind a curtain of silence and painful social indifference.

Offences are committed by people children know and trust – within institutions, in schools and within the home. Many victims depend on the perpetrators for social and economic support; these in turn, make use of their status to intimidate children and coerce them to keep silent.

**As a result, reporting is rare.** Children fear abandonment and reprisals; they worry their stories will not be believed, and they will be blamed and also bullied. But in addition, children lack information of where to go and whom to call to seek advice and assistance, to overcome trauma and to re-shape their lives. And sadly, when children do report and seek help, in many instances they fail to receive the appropriate care and support services needed to resume happy and healthy lives.

**The reality is that in most countries, safe, accessible and child sensitive counseling and reporting mechanisms are simply non-existent;** and when they have been set up, they often lack the resources and skills to support children’s healing and reintegration. More often than not, children lack trust in available services, fearing public exposure and stigmatization.<sup>1</sup> And for most of them, procedures are simply too complicated and lengthy for young people to understand and use.

Parents often feel powerless or tempted to hide these incidents of violence, as a way of supposedly protecting their children or preserving the image of the family. Professionals lack necessary training to identify early signals and to intervene in an ethical, and gender and child sensitive manner; they lack guidance about whether and how they are expected to report and refer cases. And very often they lack the capacity to effectively coordinate across sectors to prevent multiple testimonies and the consequent re-victimization of child victims.

As children often stress, sexual violence is surrounded by a conspiracy of silence.

**b) In view of its sensitive nature, sexual violence is a difficult topic to survey**

In 2006, the UN Study on Violence against Children highlighted that as many as 150 million girls and 73 million boys were raped or subject to sexual violence each year, usually by someone in their family circle. **Not much has changed since.**

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<sup>1</sup> In a survey conducted in 2010 by the European Commission with children from 27 Member States, sexual exploitation of children was identified as a priority concern; 8 in 10 young people indicated that neither of them, nor anyone they knew, had sought help when they thought their rights had been violated; 80% did not know whom to contact or what to do in such circumstances. The large majority also recognized that the procedures were too complicated and lengthy for young people to be able to understand and use.

Recent UNICEF reports acknowledge that around 120 million girls are subject to forced sexual acts and 84 million endure violence, including sexual violence, committed by their husbands or partners.

The pattern is similar across regions. In 2010 the Council of Europe launched a compelling campaign to raise awareness about this crucial topic, meaningfully entitled **the One in Five Campaign** - as 1 in 5 children across Europe may be victims of some form of sexual violence; in more than 70% of the cases, the perpetrator is someone well-known to the victim. More recently, WHO reported that every year, at least 18 million children in the European region suffer from sexual abuse.

In a number of African and Asian countries **significant national household surveys** have been conducted to assess the magnitude and incidence of children's exposure to violence, including sexual violence. Across seven of those countries more than 25% of girls and more than 10% of boys endured sexual violence in their childhood; but in most cases, less than 10% of the children surveyed had benefited from any service, including health and child protection services.

Sexual violence was largely perpetrated by people children know and trust, including husbands and boyfriends, male relatives and neighbours. In one of those countries surveyed, it was then not surprising that almost half of the girls and more than 3 quarters of boy victims never told anyone about the incident of sexual abuse, with fear of getting in trouble, being victims of gossiping or harassment, or simply not believing that any help would be made available to them.

Because of situations such as these, data available is only the tip of the iceberg! But for child victims it marks a turning point in their lives.

c) **This brings me to the third dimension I would like to highlight – the serious and lasting impact sexual violence has on children**

Surrounded by stigma, and associated with a deep sense of shame and hopelessness, sexual violence leaves deep scars on children's physical and emotional health, on their development, well-being and education.

There are a number of factors that make children, particularly girls, vulnerable to sexual violence. Key is an underlying social tolerance to violence. For girls who become pregnant or who are forced to get married, it often means further discrimination and marginalization and having to leave school, with no option for a second chance. In some countries, suicide of pregnant girls is the first cause of maternal mortality; and overall, being a mother below the age of 15 places a girl five times at a higher risk of death than women older than 20.

Dear Friends, the fourth point I would like to emphasize relates to **the impact of information and communication technologies on children's protection from sexual violence.**<sup>2</sup>

As we know, access to the Internet and use of mobile devices has become part of children's universe and daily life. Technological developments have helped to widen children's knowledge and skills, to experience creative research and cultural activities, as well as to access information and institutions for the protection of their rights.

But as we will discuss further in our meeting, together with this potential, ICTs are associated with serious risks of online abuse. Children can be exposed to harmful information, groomed by predators, and confronted with the production and dissemination of child abuse images or live web streaming. In some cases, children's own conduct online may harm others and represent a risk to themselves.

From 1997 to 2006, there has been an increase of 1,500% in the number of child sexual abuse images on the internet. Depicted children are younger and younger: in fact, more than 80% of child victims are 10 year olds or younger, and toddlers and babies are targeted too.

As with other forms of violence, online abuse leads to fear, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation and a deep sense of shame and guilt. But also in this case, violence and abuse are not inevitable and can be effectively prevented.

Our meeting is therefore a strategic occasion to **reflect on ways of advancing the implementation of a safe, inclusive and empowering digital agenda for children**, an agenda that ensures optimal balance between preserving children's natural curiosity, sense of innovation and freedom to explore and learn online, with their effective protection from harm.

And your views will be particularly valuable to identify ways of promoting **a strategic platform** to keep this agenda at the heart of our work, in which all relevant actors, including regional organizations and institutions, may take an active part.

Dear Friends,

Our annual meeting provides a unique occasion to harness the momentum that has gathered around the protection of children from violence. And with our unshakable commitment and determination, we can rise to the many challenges that persist. I have no doubt you will join in this endeavor!

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<sup>2</sup> ITU 2015 figures – a seven-fold increase in Internet penetration since the year 2000 - from 6.5 to 43% of the global population. 3,2 billion people use the Internet (2b from developing countries); but 4b in developing world remain offline (2/3 of population in that group). More than 7b mobile subscriptions worldwide (1b in 2000)