



OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON

# **VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**Council of Europe Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child  
(CDENF)**

**Plenary Meeting**

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

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Distinguished delegates,

It is a pleasure to address this meeting and to contribute to your discussion on the next Council of Europe Strategy on the Rights of the Child.

**The Council of Europe has been a key ally** for my mandate since its establishment. Through its standard setting, monitoring, campaigning and awareness-raising activities, the Council of Europe has made an invaluable contribution to children's protection from violence.

The current **Strategy on the Rights of the Child** has been an important tool to achieve this end.

**Violence against children is not only a distinct priority area of the Strategy: it cuts across all the other priority areas too.** This reflects the reality that children are often exposed to more than one form of violence, and in more than one setting. It also reflects the fact that to respond to violence effectively, we must act on several fronts at the same time, through and inclusive, child-rights centered, multi-stakeholder and cross-sectoral approach.

**This holistic approach** is what the Convention on the Rights of the Child calls for. It is also in line with the vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals. **I commend the Council of Europe** for aligning its current Strategy on the Rights of the Child with the SDGs. I trust that this same approach will be adopted for the next Strategy on the Rights of the Child.

Distinguished delegates,

**The need to tackle violence against children remains as urgent as ever.**

The 2020 Global Status Report on Preventing Violence against Children jointly published by WHO, UNICEF, UNESCO, the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children and my Office, **highlighted worrying findings on the self-reported lifetime prevalence for different types of child maltreatment in Europe.** The figures were lower than for some other regions but still a cause for serious concern. Sexual abuse had a median prevalence of 14% for girls and 6% for boys. The prevalence of physical abuse was 12% for girls and 27% for boys. Median rates of emotional abuse in Europe were 13% in girls and 6% in boys.

**The human cost** of this violence is devastating. But it also has a significant **economic cost.** For the year 2017, the total annual costs attributable to adverse childhood experiences in Europe were estimated to be 581 billion US dollars.

**Regarding responses to violence against children,** the data provided by the 2018 WHO Europe report on child maltreatment point to progress being made in the region. But it equally points to substantial gaps in coordination, data collection and funding:

- **only one in five national action plans** to tackle violence against children in Europe was found to have clear objectives with measurable targets.
- **Only one in three national action plans** was found to be fully funded.
- And **nearly half of countries** in Europe had never conducted a national child maltreatment survey using a standardized instrument, making it very difficult to assess trends over time.

**These findings resonate with those of the Council of Europe's own mid-term evaluation** report on the implementation of the current Strategy for the Rights of the Child. While noting important progress in a number of areas, the report also highlighted that not all Member States are aligning their actions fully with the Council of Europe's policy guidelines on integrated strategies on the protection of violence against children, for example in relation to **dedicating specific resources for implementation and enhancing data collection**

Distinguished delegates

**The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified these challenges.**

The COVID-19 pandemic is harming children worldwide, with **the poorest and vulnerable children, hit hardest**. What began as a health crisis risks evolving into a broader child-rights crisis, in the words of the UN SG

The pandemic and its mitigation measures **have increased the risk of children experiencing or being exposed to violence at home**. This is due to school closures, confinement, movement restrictions, added family stress related to job loss, anxiety over health and finances, and the disruption of already limited child protection and support services.

**There is evidence of increased reports of violence made by children to helplines.**

There is also evidence that the disruption to traditional referral channels for abuse and exploitation - for example from schools – can have the effect of reducing the number of reports to child protection authorities.

The pandemic has also exacerbated **gender-based violence**. UNFPA predicts 15 million additional cases of gender-based violence for every three months of lockdown.

Furthermore, increased **unsupervised internet use by children has exacerbated issues around child sexual exploitation online**. EUROPOL has reported increased referrals from hotlines dealing with online child sexual abuse material, increased attempts by offenders to access online child sexual abuse material and to connect with children, and increased activity on dark web forums devoted to child sexual abuse.

In addition, the **mid and longer-term socio-economic crisis** caused by COVID-19 will increase child poverty and the associated risk factors for violence. In less than a year, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the global economy, **triggering the deepest global recession in decades, including estimates of up to 150 million people being pushed into extreme poverty by 2021**.

**Without urgent action to protect families, the number of children living in monetary-poor households could soar up by 117 million in 2020, according to new projections as of June 2020**. We know that this will increase the risk of children experiencing violence and exploitation, with the most vulnerable children being hit hardest.

Distinguished delegates

**The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a detrimental impact** on children's mental wellbeing. In numerous consultations undertaken with children during the pandemic, they have expressed that they feel unsafe, insecure, scared, lonely and isolated.

I recently finalized a report entitled "Hidden scars: how violence harms the mental health of children". This report highlights cost-effective, evidence-based interventions to support children's mental health and well-being. It is my hope that

this report will also be useful for Member States as they respond to the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Distinguished delegates

### **Children views must be duly taken into account**

In considering the impact of the pandemic, **we must understand how children themselves see it.** My mandate joined the #COVIDUnder19 initiative, a global survey that generated over 32,000 responses from children from 130 countries on how COVID-19 affected their protection from violence, as well other areas of children's rights. The top two areas of concern for the children were education and safety. The full report will be released very soon and I will be pleased to share it with the Council of Europe.

Distinguished delegates,

**There are a number of key elements** that I encourage Member States to include in their approach to preventing and responding to violence against children.

1. **The empowerment and meaningful participation of children** must be at the heart of all our efforts. Children's participation is more than just asking them for their views. It's about truly listening to them, taking them seriously and turning their suggestions into reality. It's about providing them with the ability to influence decisions and processes that affect them at the local, regional, national and international level. And it's about providing them with the information they need to keep themselves and others safe.

The Council of Europe has a very strong track record in supporting the realization of this right and I have no doubt this theme will carry across into the next Strategy for the Rights of the Child

**2. Comprehensive and effectively implemented legislation is another crucial element.** This goes beyond the prohibition of all forms of violence to include prevention, protection for child victims, ensuring access to justice and child-sensitive complaint mechanisms, and ending impunity. My mandate has begun work on developing guidance to support Member States in strengthening their legal frameworks in this way and I look forward to engaging with the Council of Europe on this work as it progresses.

**3. An integrated, rights-based policy framework is another indispensable element.** The Council of Europe's guidelines on integrated national strategies to end violence against children have been a key reference in this area. As I outlined earlier, the deficits seen in existing strategies in Europe have included a lack of measurable, time-bound goals and insufficient resources to deliver the strategy. There is also scope for improving the links between policies on violence against children and other relevant public policies, for example in the areas of violence against women, poverty reduction, education and health

**4. The effectiveness of efforts to end violence against children cannot be ascertained without data.** Quality, disaggregated and nationally representative data on the prevalence and impact of all forms of violence against children must be gathered, with a special emphasis **on the most vulnerable and marginalized.**

**5. Within this overall legal and policy framework, prevention must encompass awareness-raising and social mobilization initiatives to challenge harmful gender and social norms that support the use of violence.** It must equally address

support for parents and caregivers, as well as ensuring safe environments for children in schools, in the community and in other settings.

**6. When it comes to responding to violence, there must be an adequately resourced child protection system** that provides an integrated, multidisciplinary and individually adapted response across the continuum of care. The precise model that is used matters less than the overall approach: we must put the child at the centre and adapt services to their rights, their needs and the context in which they live.

This means **guaranteeing strong intersectoral co-operation, referral and information sharing, as well as appropriate training for professionals.** It also demands high standards and monitoring of services to **ensure accountability.**

Distinguished delegates,

The building blocks I have outlined briefly here provide **the general foundation for an effective response to violence against children.** But it is also important to address the needs of particularly **vulnerable groups of children and forms of violence that are of particular concern.**

There are many topics you could reasonably choose to focus on. I will conclude my remarks by sharing with you some of the current priorities for my mandate, as a contribution to your reflections.

**1. Violence against children online has been a consistent theme for my mandate.** It takes many forms –child sexual abuse material, sexual extortion, grooming, live-streaming of abuse, cyberbullying, hate speech, the promotion of



violent extremism and recruitment into armed or criminal groups. Questions of regulating the private sector, balancing privacy and protection, and identifying the limits of protected speech cut across this field and remain unresolved in many Member States. The Council of Europe is well placed to support Member States in adopting a child rights-based approach as they grapple with these challenges, building on the standards and guidance that the Council has already developed.

**2. Children deprived of liberty is another key theme for my mandate,** especially as I chair the UN Task Force for the follow-up to the Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty. It remains a serious challenge to ensure that children are only ever deprived of their liberty as a measure of last resort, in line with the CRC.

The situation is also concerning for **children living in residential care**: the closure of institutions caused by COVID-19 implied a sudden shift to family-based care without the required preparatory work. On the other hand, it can be expected that the number of children at risk of separation and in need of alternative care will increase as a result of the long-term socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis on families' capacity to care.

The Council of Europe is well placed to spur progress in this field, especially by promoting alternatives to deprivation of liberty and to institutionalization.

**3. Children on the move as migrants or asylum-seekers continue to face** multiple threats to their rights, wellbeing and indeed their lives.

I know this is an area that the Council of Europe has already given a lot of attention to. Sadly, the **need for action has not diminished, as we read the news of the realities facing children and families making the crossing to Europe**. The regional standards and guidance you have developed complement those at the global level and provide a solid foundation for developing this area of work further under the next Strategy for the Rights of the Child.

**4. The last point I want to raise is the central message of my mandate regarding the mid and long-term response to the COVID-19 pandemic.**

**Children urgently need sustainably financed social protection systems linked to properly resourced child protection services.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how critical social protection coverage is. Governments around the world have acted to put social protection measures in place to support the most vulnerable, but it is not enough.

**We must ensure that child protection is recognized as a life-saving and essential service - along with health, mental health and education - as part of an intersectoral and child rights-based response to the pandemic response and recovery planning.**

This response should be built on a solid foundation of a permanent, inclusive social protection system, including universal child grants and universal health coverage, that will protect children and their caregivers from economic risks.

**The pandemic has shown us once again that poverty, discrimination and social exclusion can have devastating consequences for children.** We must use the development of recovery packages as an opportunity to reassess priorities to advance human development and reduce inequalities.

Investing in children is not just a human rights imperative. It makes economic sense. Prioritizing prevention by building safe, protective and nurturing environments for children will pay huge dividends in the longer term. Carrying out an analysis of the cost-effectiveness of such an approach - as Iceland has recently

done, for example – can provide a compelling argument when trying to convince decision-makers in charge of public finances.

Distinguished delegates,

I can assure you of my mandate's continued support for the Council of Europe in its work to promote children's rights and their protection from violence.

I will be happy to speak in further detail on the points I have raised and look forward to our exchange.

Thank you.