



OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

**Mid-term review Conference of the CoE Strategy on the Rights of the
Child**

Organized by the Council of Europe Children's Rights division

**Under the auspices of the Luxembourgish Presidency of the
Committee of Ministers**

3-4 April 2025

Strasbourg France

High-level opening session

Keynote address by

Dr. Najat Maalla M'jid,

United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary

General on Violence against Children

3 April, 2025

09:30 CET

Venue: Agora Building: Salle G03

Excellencies,

Dear colleagues and friends,

Dear children,

Three years ago, I had the privilege of addressing you at the launch of the **Council of Europe Strategy on the Rights of the Child**.

Today, I am truly delighted to join you again as you reflect on the progress made.

From the very outset, I would like to express my happiness to see you, dear children, taking part in this conversation. There is no better measure of this strategy's success than hearing the views of children and involving them as part of the solution.

This mid-term review is critical as children are paying a huge tribute. Violence against children has reached unprecedented levels. Every day, millions of children across every region experience physical, sexual, and psychological violence, both online and offline.

Armed conflicts, forced displacement, political instability, widening social inequalities, climate change, and other overlapping global crises are undermining children's safety and well-being.

Investing in child protection and wellbeing is needed more than ever and makes economic sense. The direct and indirect economic costs of violence can be as high as **11% of national GDP**. The scale of the cost becomes clear when **benchmarked against total government health expenditures**. In some countries, the annual cost of violence was found to be around **six times higher** than health expenditure. The annual economic cost of violence is 85 times higher than the annual cost of implementing its comprehensive Strategic Plan to end VAC.

Violence against children is a distinct priority area of the Strategy, but it is also a thread that runs through every other priority. In this context, the Strategy serves as a critical tool not only for advancing the protection but also the wellbeing, and empowerment of children in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

That is why, now more than ever, its full implementation is so important.

Dear colleagues,

Let me highlight some key takeaways under each priority area for action:

First, we must intensify efforts to prevent and respond to all forms of violence against children.

In this regard, I welcome Council of Europe's work among others on robust reporting mechanisms based on interagency cooperation and as part of holistic and integrated child protection systems.

This work also represents an important step toward harmonizing legislation and practice across the 46 Member States.

Safe, inclusive and empowering education that encompass age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education is another crucial element of such an integrated system for violence prevention.

For this reason, I welcome the ongoing work on drafting European standards on age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education. This is an important step forward to prevent harmful sexual behaviors and to protect children from violence through their empowerment

Second, promoting social inclusion and equal opportunities is essential to tackling violence at its root causes.

Poverty increases risks of both intimate partner violence and violence against children. It also creates risks of family separation, institutionalization, and exploitation.

Globally, 1.4 billion children lack access to social protection.

Even in the world's richest countries—including in this region—children are disproportionately represented among the poor, and at risk of social exclusion and discrimination. 1 in 4 children in EU countries are still at risk of poverty or social exclusion

That is why I urge Council of Europe member states to continue **Investing in child -sensitive social protection** as it is essential to reduce social exclusion and protect children from violence and exploitation.

Third, ensuring children's safe access to technology is a strong imperative.

Technology-facilitated violence and crimes against children is increasing. The rapid development of AI, for example, continues to change the landscape of technology-facilitated violence

More than 300 million children a year are victims of online sexual exploitation and abuse. More and more children become victims of sextortion and the publishing of intimate images and personal information. More and more children are victims of cyberbullying , trafficking, enrolment in criminal activities

And while the impact on children is devastating and long lasting, responses to date have not been strong enough. We are always lagging behind.

I commend the Council of Europe for adopting the first legally binding international treaty on AI and human rights. I also welcome ongoing work on tools to assess impact of the artificial intelligence on children's rights.

Fourth, ensuring child-friendly justice is crucial not only for responding to and ending impunity for violence against children, but also for preventing the violence that children often face within the justice systems.

Despite advancements, justice systems in many countries remain punitive and not centered on the best interest of children. Lack of alternatives such as diversion, or restorative justice options, propel more and more children in justice systems.

That is why it is crucial that Council of Europe engages in a review of the child-friendly justice guidelines with a focus on supporting states in their practical implementation.

Fifth, giving a voice to every child is no longer an option but rather an imperative. The Council of Europe has championed children's right to be heard in individual decision-making affecting children, including related to their health.

This work sets an example for involving children in broader policy making around children's protection, wellbeing and empowerment.

Sixth, we must prioritize child protection in crisis and emergency contexts.

Through my country visits in the region, I have been witnessing the devastating impact of war on children in Ukraine and neighboring states. The war has placed extraordinary strain on protection systems across the region.

Vulnerable groups—including children in institutions, with disabilities, on the move, or from marginalized communities—face exponentially greater risks of all forms of violence, family separation, trafficking, and exploitation. Despite commendable efforts, cross-border protection and referral systems remain under-resourced and unable to live up to the challenge.

Only through investment in resilient and strong child protection systems we can pave the way to child-centered recovery and long-lasting protection of children in the crises and emergency contexts.

Dear colleagues and partners,

This past year marked a historic moment for global action.

The first-ever **Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children**, held in Bogotá Colombia in November 2024, brought together over 120 countries.

Twenty-six Council of Europe Member States endorsed the Bogotá Call to Action, and twenty made national pledges.

The newly launched **Pathfinding Global Alliance on Ending Violence Against Children** now includes **42 countries**—nine from the Council of Europe member states—and is growing rapidly.

Across my country visits in this region, I continue to witness promising initiatives. Yet more must be done.

The full implementation of the Strategy provides a unique opportunity to accelerate progress.

I trust the Council of Europe and its Member States will continue to lead by example in the global movement to end violence against children and I look forward to our continued collaboration.

Thank you!