

**Presentation made at the:
Council of Europe mid-term evaluation
of the Strategy for the Rights
of the Child (2016-2021)**

**High level conference
Strasbourg 13-14 November 2019**



Dear Council of Europe, Esteemed Dignitaries, and fellow Participants,

My name is Kasra Mulot and I'm in 10th grade at the American International School in Cyprus. I am here representing Hope for Children CRC Policy Center, an NGO based in Cyprus which promotes children's rights in accordance with the principles and standards of the Convention on the Right of the Child.

Just imagine what our world would be if Martin Luther King kept his dreams to himself, if Nelson Mandela just accepted the status quo during the Apartheid, if Rosa Parks gave up her seat, and if Malala kept her views to herself.

My speech will be elaborating on the reasons children aren't speaking up against violence and providing possible solutions to tackle this important issue. Additionally, I will be providing specific information pertaining to the context of Cyprus.

Staying quiet only makes the situation worse. So how can we move forward?

The World Health Organization states that about one billion children between the ages of two and seventeen have experienced emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse (WHO, 2016). In addition, according to The Global Partnership to End Violence against Children's report from 2016, every five minutes a child dies from violence. Violence takes place when someone uses their strength or their position of power to hurt someone else on purpose, not by accident. Violence against children comes in different forms. It can be physical, emotional, sexual or psychological. It could even be in the form of negligence. Violence can either be domestic or take place within an educational environment, such as at school. Likewise, it can take place at child protection institutions, such as shelters or at juvenile centers. **Basically, violence can happen to any child, regardless of their age, gender, culture, ethnic group or socio-economic background.**

Even though, international law clearly outlines the child's right to protection under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child **Article 19** (which addresses violence against children, where it emphasizes that State Parties must have proper laws in place to prohibit violence, as well as requiring States to implement administrative, social and educational measures to protect children), in reality, the reinforcement of such laws is inconsistent. Specifically, Cyprus has

a designated law for “Violence in the Family” where under section 3 of this respective law, any act of violence against minors or in the presence of minor victims shall be prosecuted. Furthermore, in 2014, Cyprus ratified the Lanzarote Convention, with the National Law to combat sexual abuse against children.

The establishment of laws against violence is an important step, yet **IT IS NOT ENOUGH!** Governments really need to put more effort in actually implementing what they sign for in those fancy documents. They must realize how unique and invaluable the contribution of children can be. And they have an obligation to create opportunities for children to express themselves without fear or coercion.

One of the biggest issues is that children are not speaking up and the reasons that children are not speaking up may vary. To begin with, children are not always aware of what is actually considered as violence. Then there is the factor of fear, where children are simply scared of speaking up because usually violence is accompanied by manipulation or threat or retaliation. And finally, a lot of the times children are not reporting incidents of violence due to the lack of awareness of the means available to them.

In Cyprus, on one hand, children are not fully aware of their rights, and on the other hand, the child protection system is not always effective to ensure that they receive the proper protection they are entitled to if they actually do report violence. If children are aware that once they report violence, they will be heard, protected and supported in a child friendly manner, they might be more inclined to speak up. Children should also have the right to choose whether they would like to receive support without parental consent. The current law in Cyprus requires both parents to give their consent, unless of course the violence occurs within the family. HFC is advocating to change this through the Parliament.

Based on these reasons we need to identify solutions that create a safe environment that promotes confidence and bravery to report any form of violence.

BEING PASSIVE IS NOT CHOICE. WE ALL NEED TO STEP UP!

Firstly, we need to take a child's social and emotional education more seriously and implement Children's Rights education into the school curriculum in a consistent manner. This curriculum will need to educate children through non formal approaches on what the child's rights are, what their responsibilities

are, what is considered as violence and how to respond to it. Governments need to mandate the implementation of such educational programs in both public and private schools. Unfortunately, in Cyprus there isn't a strong focus on programs like that in schools and whatever takes place is the result of different initiatives from organizations such as Hope for Children. However, again the lack of funding does not always permit such programs to cover all schools in the country.

Moreover, I believe that teachers or any adult who works with children need to be trained to identify and respond to incidents of violence. Schools should also collaborate with NGOs that focus on children's rights. Campaigns from NGOs need to be more aggressive in order to raise awareness and promote their services to children. Training and support should also be provided to parents. In many countries violence against children is allowed to take place because it is commonly used as a punishment or because it is simply a custom.

Cyprus has over the years advanced a lot through the support and work of organizations like Hope for Children. HFC made the European Helpline for Children and adolescents, 116111 available to Cyprus, even though it is not available 24/7 due to lack of funding. However, the HFC Helpline and online chat operates 24/7 to provide round the clock services to children. Another measure in place is that schools are now requested to report any kind of violence to the Ministry of Education who then refers them to the relevant agencies. A very important development for Cyprus, towards the protection of sexually abused children was the establishment of the Children's House in 2017, which is run by Hope for Children in cooperation with the Cyprus police, welfare services, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education. For the first time various services come to work together under one roof for the protection of children.

Bringing my personal experience to this, I can say that being silent when I was bullied resulted in tolerance over a long period of time. I was scared to speak up. I feared retaliation. To be honest, I felt if I was speaking up, I would make a big deal of the situation. I wanted to ignore what was happening to me because it was easier, but it didn't get any better. Once, I found the courage to speak up and get help, things started getting better. That was the right thing to do all along even though it was very hard. **I would not want any other child to go through what I went through.** This is what pushed me into this direction and gave me the strength and motivation to become a Children's Rights Ambassador.

Having said all this, in the famous words of Albus Dumbledore:

"we must all face the choice between what is right and what is easy".

So, BE BRAVE! SPEAK UP! and let's work together towards ending violence against children!

Thank you for your attention.

Resources:

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-children>

<https://www.end-violence.org/>

https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/getmedia/83145000-19d4-451c-9e98-15565fd6842d/TheRightToProtection_EN.pdf

http://www.familyviolence.gov.cy/upload/publications/triptiho_en.pdf

https://www.unicef.org/violencestudy/pdf/Study%20on%20Violence_Child-friendly.pdf