



CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members of Parliament,

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Parliament of Jamaica for inviting me to this special session. Democratic parliaments are the epicenter for dialogue in our societies. There is no better place to start a participatory and action oriented discussion on issues of such relevance as the protection of children from violence for a broad range of stakeholders in Government and civil societies. I, therefore, thank you for the opportunity hoping that this effort will create an impact going far beyond these walls.

I also thank UNICEF office in Jamaica for organizing and supporting my visit to your great country and for continuously contributing to the UN Study. Country offices are crucial to ensure that the discussions at international level are well connected to the work developed nationally and locally. UNICEF Jamaica was supportive to this study since we started: our first regional consultation was in the Caribbean and most of the Studies were compiled and analyzed here. UNICEF's role remains crucial as we start to follow up on the Study.

Mr. Speaker:

Time in the life of a child has a very different dimension than that of an adult. Childhood is a short period of time in comparison to the rest of our lives. Children can't wait to see some changes happening. If improvements are not made quickly, if the mindset of a community doesn't change, if laws are not amended, every year, many children will become young adults without passing through a good school, without having proper health care or without knowing what it is like to have a safe and protective environment to live in.



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No one can dispute the importance given to the protection of childhood by all cultures and societies. In the international community, since the first international conventions, the recognition of children's need for special protection has been unwavering. The almost unanimous ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is the best confirmation of this global support to the cause of children.

In parallel, within the Americas, the broad ratification of the American Convention on Human Rights and the accession to the contentious jurisdiction of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights evidence States' commitment to the protection of human rights. In this light, I encourage the State of Jamaica to undertake the necessary steps in order to accede to the contentious jurisdiction of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights promptly.

Nevertheless, it is no secret that children continue to suffer serious violations of their rights in all parts of the world. Many are ignored, suffer in silence, without receiving assistance or help by those responsible to protect and care for them. After so much advancement in science and technology, so many improvements in governance, law, services, it is unacceptable to continue neglecting the urgent need to fulfill our obligations to protect children's rights.

Why are we failing? What needs to be done to make our promises for children a reality today? Questions like these motivated the preparation of the UN Study on Violence against Children, the first global study on all forms of violence affecting children.



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Mr. Speaker:

Unfortunately, the reality we encountered in nine regional consultations and over 40 additional visits to countries around the world and meetings with hundreds of experts and Government officials is disturbing. Whether in their homes, schools, institutions of care, communities or even in places of work, children suffer various forms of violence. Rich or poor, in western or eastern societies, children suffer violence at different moments of their lives. Even with very limited data it is possible to confirm the high prevalence of violence.

As you know, Jamaica is no exception. In an environment where violence breeds more violence, the ways in which Jamaican children experience and are subjected to violence are inextricably linked to the unrelenting levels of crime and violence affecting the island.

Violence becomes a part of a child's life in the earliest years of life – it is common for Jamaican children between ages 2 and 5 to be subjected to severe punishment using all forms of violence; boys receive this punishment more frequently and with more severity. As with other countries worldwide, girls are primarily the victims of sexual violence – in 2006, girls under 16 accounted for 32% of all sexual assaults in Jamaica. These girls suffer silently – in the same year, only 20% of rape cases were estimated to be reported to the police.

Children are surrounded by violence and fighting in their homes, at school, in residential and correctional institutions. Sixty percent of 9 to 17 year old children reported that a family member had been a victim of violence and 37% had a family member who had been killed. Only 28% of children thought their home neighborhood was very safe. In



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earlier studies, fifty percent of Jamaican men reported hitting their partners and 30% of young people were worried about the high incidence of domestic violence they witness. A 2005 survey shows that only 11% of Jamaican parents practice positive forms of discipline. Corporal punishment has been banned in early childhood institutions, but continues at higher levels in schools where children also suffer from closures and disruptions due to violence. More than 2,000 children are growing up in institutions where they are deprived of parental care.

It is important to consider what this and other data tells us about what is unfolding along gender lines – in early childhood Jamaican parents seem to provide greater attention and care to their daughters, while boys tend to be socialized to be “tough” and to fend for themselves. Later on, in their teenage years, this may push them to seek the alternative family provided by gangs.

Gender dimensions of violence are also evident in direct crimes against children – of the 175 children under 18 murdered in 2006, 149 (85%) were boys. Girls are targeted for sexual crimes, contributing to a very high level of unwanted and unsafe pregnancies; and boys are targeted in murders and shootings.

Other factors are also quite influential. The easy access to small arms and light weapons by communities, for example, increases significantly the risks of lethal violence, particularly against boys. In a couple of weeks, UNICEF and UNDP will launch a study on the impact of these weapons on children and their communities in four Caribbean and Central American countries, which will provide an opportunity to discuss adequate responses.



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With violence frequently underreported, the impact it can produce is also difficult to determine. Short- and long-term repercussions can very often be grave and damaging. Violence may result in greater susceptibility to lifelong social, emotional, and cognitive impairments and to health-risk behaviors, contributing to a long list of health problems, dropping out of school, and affecting local economies, for example.

Calling attention to this worrying reality was part of the role of the Study, but as said, the effort to develop such a broad document also aimed at giving concrete tools for action to effectively change this picture. With so many commitments already stated at international level it is time to transform this into reality. We must move from words to action.

Mr. Speaker:

The central message of the study is that **no violence against children can be justified; all violence against children can and must be prevented**. Every society, no matter its cultural, economic or social background, can and must stop every form of violence. A multidimensional approach, grounded in human rights principles and guided by evidence-based research is urgently needed to prevent and respond to violence in all circumstances.

Addressing violence against children requires the coordinated and continuous work of different sectors from government and civil society. In this sense, we strongly recommend the development of a multifaceted and systematic framework to respond to violence against children integrated into national planning processes. And such plans must be appropriately resourced, preferably with bipartisan support to fortify a long term view of consistent effort over time.



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Jamaica has already made important progresses. The Child Care and Protection Act offers an important frame for action reaffirming Jamaica's commitment to the protection of children. Also the establishment of the Office of the Children's Advocate is important to bringing greater attention to the situation of children and the impact of the measures taken to protect them. The draft National Plan of Action for an integrated response to children and violence is a critical step in the right direction and I urge the Government of Jamaica to adopt and move forward this plan in 2008.

**Violence cannot be legal.** No form of violence, however light, is acceptable under international law. If we want to protect children from all kinds of violence we must have clear and objective laws prohibiting the use of violence in all situations, including inside the home and schools. Therefore, the Study urged countries to revise and improve their legislation explicitly prohibiting all forms of violence. Of course, laws cannot perform miracles to change the reality, but they are practical tools that set standards and provide the best frame for action. And Parliaments must be the leading voices in this exercise. I hope that this house continues the dialogue we are having today taking into account studies done on this matter both here and around the world.

**Violence is not a natural or unavoidable phenomenon, it can and it must be prevented.** Years of research and collaboration between professionals of public health, security and justice indicate that if Governments address the root causes and risk factors that may give rise to violence, reality will change. Easy access to small arms, the lack of safe public spaces, the lack of trust in justice systems are all central factors for the perpetuation of violence. We must shift from "reaction to prevention": Governments and other international institutions must concentrate efforts and resources in long term measures that change once and for all the contexts where violence thrives.



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That's why we must insist on high quality education, including for example life-skills based education, equipping children with basic conflict resolution skills and teaching tolerance; we must also continue the focus on early childhood development and promoting better parenting which is evident in your plans in Jamaica; and we must insist on restricting access to small arms.

Parents and teachers must be supported and assisted to fulfill their responsibility to educate children. Experiences in various parts of the world show the effectiveness of non-violent forms of discipline. Teaching violence at early ages can actually fuel violence. Toughening young boys through neglect and physical punishment actually weakens them as it makes them more vulnerable to involvement in violence in their adolescence and adulthood. The Jamaican Parenting National Plan and Policy can be an extremely important initiative in this sense.

I was glad to learn that this hearing is taking place just a few days before the marches for the Month of Peace organized by the Violence Prevention Alliance next 4<sup>th</sup> of March. This great campaign has the potential to galvanize support to important initiatives to change attitudes that perpetuate or condone violence. Members of the Parliament can and should be important voices in this movement.

While I absolutely advocate for strong prevention efforts as central to any strategy, when violence occurs the response must be quick. Early detection mechanisms for violence are very important to reduce the devastating damage violence can cause. Children need safe and accessible channels to report violence. The justice system and police must work very carefully not to exacerbate the pain and suffering of children. Equally, perpetrators must be held accountable for their violations. An efficient system to assist victims and stop



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perpetrators is central to changing the state of fear and isolation of many victims of recurrent forms of violence.

Finally, we must invest much more in research and data collection. It is impossible to improve the situation of children if we know so little about their lives. It is unacceptable that after so many research advancements in the entire world not even half of the world population is covered by adequate death registration and cause of death classification systems. To shape policies Governments must be much better informed about the problem of violence. In this regard I applaud your efforts in setting up a Hospital-based Injury Surveillance system and creating Jamstats, as a coordinated data collection system– and I urge you to use this information to inform action and monitor progress – don't let it decay in computer systems somewhere.

Mr. Speaker:

Even in the face of serious growing concerns regarding the escalation of violence in Jamaica, your country has a vibrant culture and a history of innovation for the protection of children of all ages. I sincerely hope that this Parliament continues to promote discussions as the one we are having today, possibly led by a new Parliamentarian committee on children and violence. Discussions must continue and be expanded: efforts must be made to involve members of the Violence Prevention Alliance and those that are the most affected about the problems being discussed: children and young people.

I have always insisted that our failure to listen to children is one of the main reasons for our failure to defend their rights. Without listening and understanding their concerns, and their point of view, our chances of success in educating, protecting and caring for them



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are very limited. Throughout the Study process children from all continents described to me how much violence they experienced and feared. They were always puzzled and disappointed by the fact that some adults condoned these practices.

We should stop excusing ourselves and respond to the children's call for a world free from violence. Of course, this is a complex process and there are various social factors behind the problem of violence. But there are no excuses for inaction. We should treat this as a matter of urgency. The instruments for changing the reality described in the UN Study and some examples of interesting practices including some taking place in this country are very well known, so are the responsibilities we have vis-à-vis the situation of children.

We must prove to our children that we fulfill our commitments if we expect them to do the same. And they should not have to wait until they are adults to confirm our commitment. The reality can and must change now.