



**Statement by the United Nations Special Representative
of the Secretary General on
Violence against Children**

**to the African Committee of Experts on
the Rights and Welfare of the Child**

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Madame Chairperson, distinguished Members of the African Committee

I want to thank you very warmly for the opportunity to present this statement before you. It is with regret that I am unfortunately unable to join you in person but I am very thankful to my dear colleague and friend Akila Belembaogo, Representative of UNICEF to the African Union and before your own Committee, for kindly submitting this message on my behalf. As you know, UNICEF is a key partner and supporter of my mandate and of the process of follow-up to the UN Study on Violence against Children; and Akila, very well known to you all, has been at forefront of the promotion of children's rights within the African region.

Madame Chairperson,

I was delighted to meet you, only a few months ago and to anticipate a process of close collaboration with the Committee to advance our shared cause of children's rights, and very especially to promote progress in protection of children from all forms of violence. I was deeply encouraged by your strong commitment and by your determination to organise, in the near future, a debate on violence against children. I want to warmly congratulate you for bringing this idea forward and for organising today's special session.

Today's debate is a golden opportunity to lay down a strategic agenda for achieving steady progress in preventing and combating violence against children within the African region. I look forward to collaborating very closely with you in moving this process forward.

As you know, I have taken my position as Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children only a few months ago. This position had been recommended by the UN Study on Violence against Children, endorsed by the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly of the United Nations and formally established by a decision of the Secretary General.

The SRSG acts as a global independent advocate in favour of the protection of children from all forms of violence, working to keep the topic high in the international agenda, to generate visibility and renewed concern at the negative impact of violence on children, to promote social and behaviour change, and to mobilise support to prevent and combat this child rights violation. **The SRSG is a bridge builder and a catalyst of actions by a wide network of partners, within and beyond the UN system** - including international and regional organizations, human rights treaty bodies and mechanisms, national governments, civil society organizations, and children and young people. Partnering with critical stakeholders and promoting good practices and cross fertilisation of experiences between sectors and regions is essential to accelerate progress worldwide. It is in this spirit that the collaboration with you gains such a special relevance.

The SRSG's mandate is framed by the UN Study on Violence against Children and its strategic recommendations and it is embedded in the sound human rights normative framework we all share. The agenda opens avenues for a unique process of social change. **Moving forward the recommendations of the UN Study, violence against children can evolve from being a concern of a few into becoming a priority for all.** Together, we can narrow the gap between international and regional human rights standards and their implementation on the ground. And we can give children, all children, a genuine opportunity to develop to their full potential and to assume an active and confident role in society, a society where violence has no place.

My mandate envisages the **protection of children from violence as a human rights imperative.** Indeed, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter and other human rights instruments provide a firm normative foundation for the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against children; they constitute an indicator of genuine national commitment to respect the human dignity of the child at all times; to address risk factors that compromise children's development and citizenship; to invest in the social inclusion of the most vulnerable; and to promote actions that build upon children's best interests, perspectives and experiences.

Madame Chairperson,

The protection of children from violence calls for urgent action. Violence is a harsh reality for millions of children around the world; it remains largely invisible and socially accepted, and it has dramatic and lifelong consequences on children's life and development, carrying with it serious social costs. Guided by this sense of urgency and the need to accelerate progress in key strategic areas, over the period of three years foreseen for my mandate, I am committed to place a priority focus on:

- the promotion of a **strategic agenda**;
- **strengthening key partnerships** to achieve progress in the follow-up to the Study,
- **securing** firm support, including **sound funding** to promote progress in violence prevention and in the protection of children from all forms of violence.

A) **Promoting a strategic agenda**

The twelve overarching recommendations of the UN Study provide a navigation chart to accelerate and monitor progress in violence prevention and responses, in all settings where children may be at risk. In view of their particular urgency, the UN Study identified **time bound targets for three strategic overarching recommendations.** These three areas remain critical and require renewed and firm attention at all levels. For this reason, I am committed to giving priority attention to initiatives aimed at:

- **the development in each State of a national comprehensive strategy** to prevent and respond to all forms of violence, mainstreamed in the national planning process, coordinated by a high level focal point with leading responsibilities in this area, supported by adequate human and financial resources to support implementation, and effectively evaluated;
- **the introduction of an explicit national legal ban** on all forms of violence against children, in all settings; and
- **the promotion of a national system of data collection, analysis and dissemination, and of a research agenda on violence against children.**

B) Consolidating strategic partnerships

The process of development of the UN Study generated solid and strategic alliances in favour of the protection of children from all forms of violence. The Africa region played an important role in this regard, with the organisation of significant regional consultations and contributions to expert discussions which became instrumental for the development of the Study and the shaping of its recommendations. To advance progress in this field, strengthened partnerships will be crucial and I am committed to further consolidate strategic alliances and promote a consultative approach with regional organizations and institutions, and very especially with the African Union and the African Committee on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

C) Securing firm support

Sound support and predictable funding are also indispensable for the effective and independent performance of my mandate. In this regard, the General Assembly has called upon States and institutions concerned, United Nations agencies and entities, regional and civil society organizations, and the private sector to provide support, including financial support.

Cooperation with key partners

a) Cooperation with intergovernmental and regional organizations and institutions

Violence against children is gaining an increasing attention at the regional level. Regional cooperation helps to capitalize on the potential offered by States in each individual region, while promoting the development of strategies tailored to the national context and enhancing opportunities to mainstream universal values and shared commitments.

The widely participatory regional consultations organised in support of the UN Study and the preparations of the Brazil Congress against Sexual Exploitation were instrumental in generating interest and commitment towards the elimination of violence in its many forms. In

some cases, a regional follow-up mechanism was set up to facilitate coordination of efforts and help to advance implementation of the Study recommendations. Building upon these significant developments, I give a special attention to strengthening institutional collaboration with regional fora, to help promote information sharing and cross fertilization of experiences, scale up positive initiatives, encourage evidence based approaches to overcome prevailing challenges, and influence progress within and across regions.

With this in mind, at the end of November, I held important meetings in Addis Ababa with **the African Union Social Affairs Commissioner and the Chairperson of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and the Welfare of the Child**, with a view to exploring opportunities for collaboration in the protection of children from all forms of violence. Violence against children has been high in the policy agenda of the African region, including in the context of the implementation of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child; during the process of development of the UN Study and when the 2006 Day of the African Child was devoted to this topic; during the Second Pan-African Forum on Children, held in Cairo, and in “The Call for Accelerated Action to make Africa Fit for Children”, adopted thereafter. With the process of follow-up to the UN Study, renewed opportunities exist to move this agenda forward.

My initial meetings laid the ground for a fruitful institutional collaboration, including for the promotion of initiatives to map out critical developments and positive initiatives across the region and within African Union Member States, to support legislative reforms aimed at the protection of children from all forms of violence, to encourage the development of independent institutions on children’s rights, as well as to further consolidate national information and data systems on violence against children.

I look forward to advancing work in these areas in close collaboration with you.

b) Cooperation with UN and regional human rights treaty bodies and mechanisms

The development of a close collaboration with human rights bodies and mechanisms is another essential component of my agenda. This cooperation is critical to pursue an integrated approach to children’s protection from violence and to capitalize on synergies across mandates and regions, in the overall framework of the implementation of children’s rights standards and commitments to children, including those undertaken at the UN Millennium Summit and at the Special Session on Children, and more recently, at the Brazil World Congress against Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents.

My cooperation with your Committee and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child gains therefore a crucial relevance, in view of your decisive advocacy and monitoring role on the implementation, by States Parties, of their commitments to children. Your role is indeed critical in assessing progress on the protection of children from all forms of violence and supporting countries in their efforts at the national level. Moreover, the inclusion in your concluding observations of a specific section on the follow-up to the Study recommendations and on cooperation with my mandate can become a strategic contribution to our shared agenda. And in addition, the promotion of thematic discussions can help to shed light on

specific areas where challenges remain and opportunities exist for consolidating the protection of children from all forms of violence. Today's thematic debate confirms this well.

c) Cooperation with civil society and children led organizations

As you know, the development of the UN Study benefited from the strong support of civil society organizations and from the decisive contribution of children and young people. Both remain active partners in the process of implementation of the Study recommendations and I am committed to reinforce our collaboration. .

Collaboration with the **civil society** has been facilitated by the establishment, in 2007, of the NGO Advisory Council, which was formed to support strong and effective follow-up to the Study. The Council includes equal representation from leading international organizations and national and regional NGOs and its primary aim is to encourage and maintain NGO involvement at national, regional and international levels, in advocacy with governments, UN agencies and other stakeholders for full implementation of the Study's recommendations.

As a result of this fruitful collaboration, it has been agreed to pursue joint efforts to promote the following goals: the adoption of national plans of action to advance implementation of the Study recommendations, the legal prohibition of all forms of violence against children in all settings, the collection and dissemination of disaggregated data on violence against children, and the establishment of effective and accessible complaint mechanisms for children. A special attention will also continue to be given to the promotion of children's participation in the Study follow-up process, benefiting from their insights and experience, and mobilizing and empowering them to take action in their own communities.

The collaboration with the African Child Policy Forum has been decisive in this regard and I am truly delighted to see my distinguished friend Dr Assefa Bequele contributing to this important special session.

Over the past years, the participation of **children and young people** in the promotion of actions to address violence against children has been significant. Their contribution to the UN Study was essential and their involvement continues to be critical for the steps ahead.

Across regions, children express strong concern at the incidence of violence; they inspire a deep sense of urgency, and their views and recommendations help to refine the effectiveness of our actions, including by helping to better understand the hidden face of violence, to raise awareness and promote advocacy on positive initiatives, and to support the development of child sensitive policies and mechanisms. Dialogue and regular consultations with children and young people will remain a core component of my mandate and I look forward to cooperating with the African Committee in supporting initiatives within the African region.

Madame Chairperson,

In my meetings within the UN Human Rights Council, just a few days ago, including during a whole day debate devoted to the protection of children from sexual violence, I have heard the reaffirmation of a widely shared concern at the pervasive nature of violence against children, their invisibility in society, and their long lasting impact on children's development and human rights. I have witnessed once again the strong call for breaking the conspiracy of

silence around this child rights violation, and the strengthening of child protection systems where violence has no place and where children can truly develop to their full potential.

The many experiences presented before the Human Rights Council shed light on the serious risks of violence children endure in all parts of the world, and also in all settings, including within the home and within schools, where children are expected to enjoy a safe and trusted environment and support.

Children of all ages witness domestic violence. This is associated with subsequent victimisation and further violence. Girls appear to be at greater risk of sexual violence and forced and early marriage. According to available data, up to one third of adolescent girls report their first sexual experience as being forced. Pregnant and married students are often forced to leave school. Girls from poorer families and living in rural areas are most likely to be married young, as a result of social and economic pressures on their parents; they are also disproportionately victims of violence by their husbands. In some communities, the practice of female genital mutilation is maintained with the belief that it will protect girls' virginity while being a precondition of marriage; at the same time this practice compromises girls' health and education, puts at risk their right to life and may lead to maternal death.

Although less frequently acknowledged, sexual violence against boys is also a significant problem, including within the home. Official statistics largely under-represent the number of victims, and reporting by boys seems to be particularly hard, including as a result of shame, guilt and fear of not being believed or of suffering bullying and harassment.

Children witness violence and endure physical, emotional and sexual abuse every day. And yet, children fear reporting, worried they will not be believed or that they may suffer reprisals or stigmatisation as a result. They also do not know where to go or whom to call to benefit from counselling and support, and to see the incidents of violence effectively addressed and impunity combated.

In many countries, the normative framework is insufficient to address violence against children. Indeed, violence against children is still not prohibited in a large number of countries, be it in the school, in care institutions or in the home; in some countries, judicial decisions also condone the use of measures such as caning and flogging as a form of sentencing.

Across regions, data on violence against children remains scanty and fragmented, national studies are scarce and reporting remains weak and difficult. In the case of violence within the home, including rape and coerced sex believed to be legitimate when within marriage, the pressure to conceal it is particularly strong, with shame, secrecy and denial leading to a pervasive culture of silence.

In spite of these many challenges, the past few years have helped to raise awareness of the negative impact on children of this child rights violation, and to identify strategic ways of consolidating national protection systems against all forms of violence.

We have learned that it is critical that each country shape a national strategic agenda to prevent and address violence against children in all its forms, and to place a special emphasis on key dimensions or core building blocks of such a strategy, in particular:

- the need for solid data and research to break the invisibility of this phenomenon, to overcome the challenges associated with the emotional debate it usually generates and, not less importantly, to inform planning, policy making and social investment;
- the need to understand underlying causes and identify the groups of children at a greater risk, to enable well targeted policy action to safeguard the realisation of their rights;
- the importance of strong and explicit legislation to clearly condemn violence, to protect the rights of child victims and to fight impunity;
- and the urgent need for accessible, child sensitive counselling, complaint and investigation mechanisms to address effectively any incidence of violence and to provide redress and assistance to victims.

Madame Chairperson,

In all these areas, the voice of the African Committee will be critical and indeed indispensable to help achieve progress. I would warmly welcome joining hands with you in transforming this critical child rights concern into a visible priority for all countries within the African continent. And I would very especially like to submit to your consideration the following suggestions:

- a) Building upon the important discussions held with the Chairperson and the strategic debate held today with the Committee, I would welcome **developing a strategic agenda of collaboration with the African Committee** to help consolidate an African fit for Children where violence has no place;
- b) Guided by your important monitoring role, I would like to encourage you to include the protection of children from all forms of violence as a **systematic and core section of your review of States Parties reports on the implementation of the African Charter, and also as a visible focus of your concluding observations** – in this regard, the recommendations of the UN Study may be used as a significant tool to support the promotion and assessment of progress within the African continent;
- c) In view of the critical importance of law reform to unequivocally prohibit all forms of violence, to protect child victims and witnesses and provide means of redress, as well as to support information and social mobilisation campaigns towards violence

abandonment and elimination, I would welcome joining hands with you in an **advocacy campaign to call for an explicit legal ban on all violence against children, including corporal punishment; the announcement of such an advocacy campaign could be a tangible outcome of today's strategic debate;**

- d) I would also like to encourage the African Committee, in close collaboration with key partners, including UNICEF and the African Child Policy Forum who are joining hands with us today, to promote the development of an **African report on national follow up to the recommendations of the UN Study on Violence against Children;** such a Pan African report can become a critical advocacy tool for promoting progress in the region, and also a powerful source of information on good practices to support the scaling up of positive initiatives, within and beyond the region;
- e) Finally, Madame Chairperson, I would like to seek your support in **placing violence against children high in the policy agenda of the African Union and its Member States;** African leaders have been vocal in their commitment to the protection of children's rights, including through their strong call for action at the Pan-African Forum on Children; I therefore look forward to working together with you to promote the inclusion of the protection of children from all forms of violence in a future Summit of African Heads of State and Government.

Madame Chairperson and distinguished Members of the Committee,

Let me thank you once again for your strong commitment to children's rights and for your decisive support to building a world fit for children, a world where violence has no place. Let me thank you very especially for the opportunity of joining you in this important special session on violence against children.

I look forward to collaborating very closely with you in moving this agenda forward and to supporting the future steps the Committee will promote to protect children from all forms of violence.