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Commissioner and Rapporteur on the Rights
of Children



Note for the opening of the Conference

International Conference

“Learn Without Fear – Looking at Violence from the Gender perspective”

Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear participants,

I would like to thank Plan International for inviting me to the International Conference “Learn Without Fear - Looking at Violence from the Gender Perspective”, Hamburg, November 12- 14. Since the very moment I received your generous invitation, I have accepted to come. Unhappily, at the eve of the Conference of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Organization of the American States (OAS), Washington DC, where I sit as Commissioner and Rapporteur on Children, has accepted an invitation to visit Brasilia on the very same dates for a meeting of

MERCOSUR authorities on human rights. Being the Brazilian member I could not decline to participate in this visit. I hope that you understand this unexpected change of my plans and accept my apologies.

I want to extend my warmest greetings to my friends present in this conference and take this opportunity to thank Plan International for all the outstanding contribution you gave to the preparation and elaboration of the World Report on Violence Against Children, reaffirming your commitment to secure the rights of children all over the world.

Violence is no accident

The World Report, as you know, calls for an end to all justification to any form of violence against children, girls and boys. It also points out that violence “is no accident”– violence can and must be prevented – and violence against children cannot be legal in any country or in any setting. More importantly, the study proposes to focus the work that Member States do together with international organizations, regional organizations and civil society on implementing their commitment to protect children from all violence.

The study confirmed that, although being one of the most clearly condemned forms of violence, violence against girls is possibly one of the most invisible and prevalent forms. Violence remains unregistered and unpunished, being sometimes even condoned by society under the guise of culture or tradition. The inadequacy of justice and security systems, and the pretexts of privacy or of an incontestable adult authority over girls are used to shield perpetrators and keep violence against children insulated by walls of silence.

The study also asserts that violence against children takes a variety of forms and is influenced by a wide range of factors, from the personal characteristics of the victim and perpetrator to their social, cultural, and physical environments. Economic development, social status, age, sex and gender are among the many factors associated with the risk of violence. Although the consequences of violence may vary according to its nature and severity, the short- and long-term repercussions are very often grave and damaging.

The example of sexual harassment

Studies suggest that sexual harassment of school-girls is common throughout the world, to varying degrees, by teachers themselves

as well as by students, and that it may be particularly common and extreme in places where other forms of school violence are also prevalent. Teachers often see the sexual harassment among students – most often directed against girls – as a normal part of school life, and therefore ignore it. Under these circumstances it is difficult for students to report it. In some societies sexual harassment of girls is not commonly reported, perhaps because girls are commonly separated from boys in schools, or also perhaps because girls are reluctant to speak out for fear of retaliation. Harmful cultural stereotypes that demean children because of their sex or their known or suspected sexuality create environments in which children can be abused with impunity, including by adults in positions of trust and authority.

The hidden curriculum

The “Violence against Children Study” has clarified the issue of girls’ poor school attendance, reminding that “almost all violence in schools reflects a ‘hidden curriculum’ that promotes gender inequality and stereotyping. These stereotypes often make schools unsafe and uncomfortable for girls and are prominent among the reasons why in some countries girls, particularly

during adolescence, are less likely to attend school than adolescent boys.”

Your conference is extremely timely to remind states that it is urgent to ensure that anti-violence policies and programmes are designed and implemented from a gender perspective, taking into account the different risks facing girls and boys in respect to violence. States should promote and protect the human rights of girls everywhere and most particularly, for your discussion, in schools, and address all forms of gender discrimination as part of a comprehensive violence prevention strategy.

Addressing States

States should prioritize preventing violence against girls by addressing its underlying causes. Just as resources devoted to intervening after violence are essential, states should allocate adequate resources to address risk factors and prevent violence before it occurs. Policies and programmes should address immediate risk factors such as family breakdown, abuse of alcohol or drugs as well as reducing access to guns and other weapons. In line with the Millennium Development Goals, attention should be focused on economic and social policies that address poverty, gender and other forms of inequality, income gaps,

unemployment, urban overcrowding and other factors which undermine society.

Empowering girls

Any strategy to be successful, involves empowering girls and a focus on an active and inclusive process centered on the girl that engages all stakeholders – parents, guardians, teachers, elders, the community and the state at large. This process will for sure result in girls who are transformed through the acquisition of knowledge on their rights and their bodies and the skills and tools needed for developing a strong and proud sense of their own identity.

Empowering girls means addressing the low levels of expectation that they may hold for themselves as a result of societal and familial attitudes and behaviours, building their social assets by ensuring their access to education and skills building and creating channels for girls' participation, such as through girl-friendly spaces and environments that provide girls a wide range of resources and activities.

Girls cannot wait more for the protection of their rights in schools and institutions for education. It is time that attention must be prioritized to gender issues and their links with violence. Governments must acknowledge the pervasive impact of

entrenched gender stereotypes on the nature of violence in and around schools. Male students, staff and community members, must be actively encouraged as strategic partners and allies; and along with female students, staff and community members, must be provided with opportunities to increase their understanding of how to stop gender discrimination and its violent manifestations.

No excuses can be accepted

After years of accumulated recommendations by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and numerous additional international efforts, after the conclusion of the Study in 2006, after one year of follow up in 2007 and the creation of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur to the Secretary General (SRSG) for violence against children soon – who will hopefully soon be appointed by the UN Secretary General, it is not possible to ignore the need to urgently and seriously invest in the protection of girls from violence. It is not possible to continue to ignore that violence is still condoned in many places in a scandalous contradiction to basic human rights principles. The mechanisms and strategies available are not yet adequately implemented to effectively change the patterns that still allow so much violence to happen. No excuses can be

accepted for inaction. The international community cannot fail on such a consensual matter, and children cannot wait any longer.

I am convinced that your conference will be an outstanding contribution to the implementation of the recommendations of the study on violence. I wish you all the best in this decisive endeavour in the next three days.

Please be sure that I will miss your company and commitment and that of my friends of Plan International.

Many thanks.

Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro,

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