



# General Assembly

Distr.: General  
16 December 2014

Original: English

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## Human Rights Council

Twenty-eighth session

Agenda items 2 and 3

**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner  
for Human Rights and reports of the Office  
of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political,  
economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development**

## **Summary of the panel discussion on accelerating global efforts to end violence against children**

**Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

GE.14-24459



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## I. Introduction

1. Pursuant to its resolution 25/10, the Human Rights Council held a panel discussion, on 23 September 2014, at its twenty-seventh session, on accelerating global efforts to end violence against children, with a particular focus on how to better prevent violence and protect children as a global priority and cross-cutting concern, and to share best practices and lessons learned in that regard. In resolution 25/10, the Council also requested the High Commissioner to prepare a summary report on the discussions of the panel, and to submit it to the Council before its twenty-eighth session. The present report was prepared pursuant to that request.

2. The panel discussion was chaired by the President of the Human Rights Council and moderated by the Associate Director of Child Protection, Programme Division, of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Susan Bissell. It was opened by the Director of the Research and Right to Development Division of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). The panel comprised the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, Marta Santos Pais; the Ombudsman on the Rights of the Child of the Russian Federation, Pavel Astakhov; the Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and Chairperson of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, Benyam Dawit Mezmur; Fatiha Hadj Salah, medical doctor; Jorge Freyre, of the Latin American and Caribbean Movement for Children; and the Director of Children Protection, Save the Children – Liberia, Laila Khondkar.

## II. Opening statement by the Director of the Research and Right to Development Division

3. In her opening statement, the Director of the Research and Right to Development Division of OHCHR, Jane Connors, stated that violence against children could take many forms: physical brutality; sexual abuse, including rape; torture; inhuman and degrading treatment such as acid attacks; forced and child marriage; killings in the name of family "honour"; trafficking; forced begging; bonded labour; emotional violence; and neglect. Very often, the forms of violence overlapped, although the most common form of violence that children endured was corporal punishment. Far too often, these phenomena were invisible. Violence against children tended to be accepted as inevitable, treated with indifference or condoned. Although there were insufficient data on the subject, it was estimated that, annually, between 500 million and 1.5 billion children experience violence.

4. Violence against children was never justifiable and was entirely preventable. Nonetheless, it occurred in every country in the world, and crossed the boundaries of race, class, religion and culture. In violation of human rights norms, particularly the Convention of the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocols thereto, children were victims of violence in multiple settings, including their homes, schools and care and justice institutions. They were also at risk of being subjected to violence in their communities, in places where they worked or in cyberspace.

5. Since the release of the report of the independent expert for the United Nations study on violence against children on the rights of the child in 2006,<sup>1</sup> the need to prioritize the protection of children from violence had been increasingly recognized at the international,

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<sup>1</sup> A/61/299.

regional and national levels. There was a better understanding of how and why children were exposed to violence, and programmes had been developed in many countries to ensure the protection of children. Despite these advances, however, progress had been slow. There had been insufficient investment, in particular in relation to prevention and family support, as well as in research and data collection. Many laws were not effectively enforced, and national strategies were often underresourced and lacked coordination.

6. Ms. Connors stressed that violence against children was a complex, multidimensional phenomenon, and combating it required the sustained cooperation of many different actors. Public health, criminal justice, social services, education, human rights organizations, media and businesses – all had to work together with decision-makers at every level of society. A multifaceted response also comprised the acknowledgement of the primary role of the family in the upbringing and development of the child, and the obligation of the State to support parents and caregivers in that role. States had to prioritize prevention, including by raising awareness of the need to change attitudes that condone or normalize violence against children.

7. Ms. Connors emphasized that action was also required at the international level to combat violence against children – a major threat to global development, and a substantive barrier to the realization of the Millennium Development Goals. While the primary victims of violence against children are the children themselves, it also had negative consequences for the wider community and the national economy. It was an obstacle to the achievement of gender equality, and was closely interconnected with deprivation, poor health and poor school performance.

### **III. Contributions of the panel**

8. In her introductory remarks as panel moderator, the Associate Director of Child Protection, of the Programme Division of UNICEF, Susan Bissell, stated that violence against children was not only a matter of global importance but also an issue relevant to each and every State. She shared statistics released in the 2014 UNICEF report “Hidden in Plain Sight”: in 2012 alone, 95,000 children and adolescents under the age of 20 were killed – almost one in five of all homicide victims that year; almost one quarter of girls aged 15 to 19 worldwide (almost 70 million) had reported being victims of some form of physical violence since age 15; and around 120 million girls under the age of 20 (about one in 10) had been subjected to forced sexual intercourse or other forced sexual acts at some point in their lives.

9. Ms. Bissell stated that, although the figures might seem discouraging, violence against children was not inevitable and it was possible to end it. Political commitment to address violence against children had never been greater, including as the international community embarked on discussions on the post-2015 development agenda. Research had also brought a better understanding of effective strategies to prevent and respond to the different forms of violence that children faced.

10. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, Marta Santos Pais, stated that, while the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child was being commemorated and its achievements duly celebrated, work still needed to be done. Violence against children was a challenge that continued to compromise the rights of children around the world, and had to be addressed urgently. She also stressed, however, that there was currently a crucial opportunity to make a change for the better, in particular in the post-2015 development agenda.

11. The Special Representative’s global survey on violence against children, entitled *Toward a World Free from Violence*, had been informed by reports from more than 100

countries in all regions, showed that strategic changes had been made in law, policy and practice, but had also shed light on gaps and areas of concern. It showed that the human rights foundation of the violence prevention agenda has been widened, and that efforts at the regional level had been consolidated. The Special Representative emphasized that violence against children had been prioritized in the political agenda of regional organizations and institutions around the world, and important commitments and declarations had been adopted by Governments in all regions. While noting the importance of these commitments, however, she stressed that they were only meaningful when effectively implemented. The survey had also showed that changes had been made at the national level: almost 90 countries had indeed elaborated time-bound and comprehensive agendas to prevent and eliminate violence against children. Despite these advances, however, only 8 per cent of the world's children had legal protection from violence.

12. The Special Representative pointed out that many challenges remained, and that the post-2015 global development agenda represented a unique opportunity in this context, given that it was likely that violence against children would be included as a core target and as a cross-cutting concern in the different goals. This was important, because violence against children generated costs of trillions of dollars every year. She stressed the importance of preserving the eradication of violence against children as a distinct target and as a cross-cutting concern, noting that children had indicated that they considered this a key issue during the global consultations held in preparation for the post-2015 development agenda. It was fundamental that children were engaged in both: the development of the agenda, and the way future progress was evaluated.

13. The Ombudsman for the Rights of the Child of the Russian Federation, Pavel Astakhov, described the national programme of the Russian Federation on preventing violence against children and rehabilitating victims, and how it aimed at incorporating new technology as part of its strategy. Regional programmes on preventing and detecting cases of violence at an early stage had been set up, and the Ministry of Education had developed methodological recommendations on violence prevention for relevant regional authorities, containing guidance on the registration and investigation of complaints made by children to guarantee that the victims had access to consultation and could be reintegrated. The federal law on education provided for free medical or social assistance for underage victims, including psychological counselling for children and their parents, and assistance for witnesses. Mediation services had also been developed to address family disputes, in particular in the case of underprivileged families and their children.

14. According to the legislation of the Russian Federation, violence against children could lead to life imprisonment, and children were presumed to be "helpless" until the age of 12 years. Sanctions for criminal liability for using children in pornography had become tougher. The Ombudsman expressed concern about Russian children being subjected to violence when adopted abroad; a monitoring group had been set up to investigate this phenomenon. Concern was also expressed regarding violence against children in armed conflict, and the lack of assistance available to children and families attempting to leave dangerous situations. In such situations, children might not be provided with the necessary educational and medical services, and facilities with children present could be attacked. The Ombudsman called upon the international community to protect children in such situations in accordance with international law.

15. The Vice-chairperson of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and Chairperson of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, Benyam Dawit Mezmur, stated that, although Africa was a diverse continent, the response to violence against children faced similar challenges in many African countries. No country could claim to have implemented fully the Convention on the Rights of the Child or the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. The Committee on the Rights of

the Child devoted much time to discussing violence against children in its dialogue with States parties. Prevention should be prioritized; the aim should be to move away from reporting what happens to reporting before it happens. Mr. Mezmur stressed that human rights education was central for effective prevention – when children were aware of their rights, they were empowered. Violence should be banned in all settings, using a child rights-based approach that protected both girls and boys, and should include not only physical violence, but psychological and social violence as well. The role of birth registration in protecting children could not be over-emphasized, and any registration system should reflect the reality on the ground, taking into account local geographical, cultural and political factors. Although civil society had an important role to play in preventing violence against children, States had the primary responsibility in this area.

16. Mr. Mezmur highlighted the connection between children's rights and the business sector. Even though Africa was booming, economic development should not come at the expense of violence against children. Political will was the key to moving forward. States should take important steps, such as ratifying international instruments and making commitments to end conflict, but also smaller steps, such as cooperating with United Nations human rights treaty bodies and providing information when requested.

17. Fatiha Hadj Salah, a medical doctor from Algeria, stated that the decision to convene the panel discussion reflected the need to ensure that prevention and protection were priorities – children had an absolute right to freedom from violence, and if the right was not upheld, the consequences for the child's health could be disastrous. Despite the progress made by those involved in protecting children in the United Nations system, detecting, assessing and caring for children who experience violence remained difficult. Nonetheless, the direct effects of ill-treatment could be detected by those in contact with children, including those working in health care, and social workers, teachers and police officers. They had privileged access to children and their families, and had a vital role to play in detecting, supporting and taking steps early on. Inter-sectoral cooperation was essential in order to identify risk factors, and multidisciplinary teams were needed to address violence against children fully. All persons working with children should be trained to detect ill-treatment. Children with disabilities deserved special attention, given that they were particularly vulnerable.

18. Dr. Hadj Salah stated that health-care workers were often faced with situations where, while there was no certainty of ill-treatment, evidence was visible in what children said: children must be heeded. Risk factors should be identified within families, such as prior ill-treatment and emotional or psychological factors. More research in this area was however needed, and partnerships should be developed with national and international teams and with expert networks to conduct further investigation in to the causes of ill-treatment. Awareness-raising was also crucial: children, families and the wider public should be aware that violence can be prevented.

19. Jorge Freyre, of the Latin American and Caribbean Movement for Children, stated that Latin America was the most violent region in the world, with children and adolescents suffering as a result. Members of the Movement for Children worked with States, civil society and groups of children, as well as with regional human rights bodies, to combat violence against children. Subregional mappings of the current legislative framework, policies, monitoring systems and practices at the national level had been undertaken, and best practices and successful cases have been highlighted. The events organized in each subregion had led to a declaration of commitments by States and a subregional roadmap and national roadmaps.

20. The Director of Children Protection, Save the Children – Liberia, Laila Khondkar, spoke about the lessons learned from the participation of children in the prevention of violence. The Convention on the Rights of the Child placed an obligation on States to

respect the right of children to express their views, as individuals and as a group, in all matters of concern to them, and to take their views seriously. In many regions of the world, however, children had traditionally not been deemed to have the experience, knowledge or understanding necessary to be directly involved in contributing to major decisions affecting their lives. Since the Convention was adopted 25 years earlier, thousands of initiatives in all regions of the world had created space for children and young people to begin to influence the laws, policies, services and decisions that affected their lives. They demonstrated that they had their own unique perspectives and expertise regarding the challenges they faced and the best strategies for resolving them, and that when provided with the opportunity, information and support, could and did make a significant contribution to decisions affecting their lives. The participation of children could therefore enhance the quality of decision-making and have positive outcomes for the realization of their rights. Although adults commonly underestimated children's capacities, children wanted greater control over the issues that affect them. Reports suggested that participation improved children's skills, confidence and self-esteem.

21. Ms. Khondkar emphasized that participation led to better protection. Passive children could be abused by adults with impunity more easily. Providing children with information, encouraging them to articulate their concerns and introducing safe and accessible mechanisms for challenging violence and abuse were key strategies for providing effective protection. Participation continued, however, to be impeded by long-standing practices and attitudes, as well as by political and economic barriers. In addition, while many children found it difficult to make their voices heard, some groups of children, including younger children, girls, children with disabilities, working children or those out of school, children from indigenous or minority communities, and poorer children, faced additional hurdles. States had enacted legislation that recognized, promoted and respected the right of girls and boys to express themselves freely and to ensure that their views were given due weight, in accordance with their age and maturity. They had to establish and resource permanent structures at the national and local levels to consult with children when developing, implementing and monitoring laws, policies and programmes that affected them. States should ensure that professionals, parents and teachers know how to involve children meaningfully, and that this was done within a permanent structure, not on an ad hoc basis.

## **IV. Summary of the discussion**

22. During the plenary discussion, delegations from Algeria, Austria, Burkina Faso, Costa Rica (on behalf of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States), Croatia, Ethiopia (on behalf of the African Group), the European Union, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Lithuania, Mexico, Montenegro, Paraguay, the Philippines (on behalf of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), Spain, Sweden (on behalf of the Nordic States), the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Timor-Leste (on behalf of Portuguese-speaking countries), Togo, Tunisia, Ukraine, the United Arab Emirates (on behalf of the Arab Group), the National Human Rights Institution of Ukraine, Save the Children International (in a joint statement), the British Humanist Association, the World Organisation against Torture (in a joint statement with Defence for Children International) and the International Institute for Non-Aligned Studies took the floor.

### **A. General remarks on violence against children**

23. Several delegations stressed the fact that violence was both a cause and consequence of social exclusion and discrimination: it marked children's inequality and powerlessness. It

stemmed from social and economic inequalities and educational systems. Poverty, lack of livelihood opportunities and illiteracy remained root causes that compounded the vulnerability of families and children to violence. Delegations pointed to the importance of providing employment opportunities and addressing widespread poverty and underdevelopment.

24. Reference was made to a growing body of scientific evidence demonstrating that exposure to violence and stress, especially at a very young age, provoked irreversible brain damage in children. Delegations referred to the huge costs of violence against children. However, the shortage of reliable data remained a major obstacle to capturing fully the extent of violence against children.

25. Delegations emphasized that strong political commitment was needed, and pointed out the importance of sharing good practices with a view to inspiring actions that strengthen and complement mechanisms set up at the national level. Investing time and resources into eradicating violence against children in all settings was considered essential to create a foundation for a society that protects the most vulnerable.

## **B. Prevention of violence against children**

26. Many delegations highlighted the importance of prevention, pointing out that violence could be prevented. To do so, strategies should concentrate on causes rather than consequences, and invest in all contexts in which children live, play and learn. In conjunction with appropriate budgeting, staff should be trained, particularly in education, health and justice. A multisectoral approach was advocated, including exchange of information between those involved in children's lives, and protocols and guidelines for professionals working with children. Cross-border cooperation was also mentioned as an important tool, particularly in cases concerning issues of transnational child protection.

27. It was noted that effective protection from violence was only possible by taking an integrated approach. In doing so, States should raise awareness, break the silence regarding violence against children and challenge the social norms that justify it.

## **C. Cooperation of family, society and the State**

28. Several delegations focused on the role of the family, society and the State in protecting children from violence. They pointed out that a legal ban on violence against children was needed, and that to be able to achieve real implementation, must involve broad segments of society and engage all relevant actors in seeking sustainable change. Changing attitudes of lawmakers, parents, teachers and other adults dealing with children was a key issue.

29. Delegations noted the primary role of the family in the upbringing and development of the child, recalling that the well-being of the child was closely tied to that of the family. The State should, as a matter of priority, provide information and support to families and caregivers in their role of bringing up children. The role of the education system and its ability to shape the minds of young people to their benefit or detriment was also highlighted. Children should not be taught to accept violence as a means of imposing their values and judgements on others. Bullying in schools as a manifestation of peer-to-peer violence was also raised, as was the need for international initiatives to counter it.

30. Many delegations drew attention to the role of the international community in stopping violence against children, and the fact that progress remained scattered and slow was an indictment of the international human rights system. States called upon the Human

Rights Council to be more involved in current and future efforts in this area, and for it to be a matter of priority in the post-2015 development agenda.

#### **D. Empowerment of children**

31. The importance of empowering children in ending violence against them was discussed by many delegations. Children should be made aware of their rights and have access to mechanisms to protect themselves. Impunity against perpetrators of violence against children should be combated, and independent, and child-friendly complaint mechanisms should be established.

32. Some delegations pointed out the positive effect of developing and deploying suitable methods for implanting the child's right to be heard in processes, which were crucial for their lives and well-being. The need for standardized, child-friendly hearing procedures was also stressed, as was the need to effectively listen to children, provide anonymous and confidential reporting and work with them to identify and apply solutions to eradicate violence.

33. Helplines and interactive webpages were mentioned as examples of good practice to provide children with information on their rights, the ability to report abuse and to offer professional help and support.

#### **E. Children in situations of particular risk**

34. Various delegations referred to children in situations of particular risk of violence. These included children in areas of conflict, which could expose children to the risk of kidnapping, trafficking, torture or death, as well as the deprivation of medical care. Children in street situations were also mentioned by several States, which had put in place programmes to assist them. The commercialization of witch-hunting, exorcisms and deliverances was also raised as a concern, with one delegation reporting that it had contributed to the spread of violence against children in many communities, which in turn undermined broader efforts to combat violence against children.

35. Children deprived of their liberty were also mentioned as being at a higher risk of violence than others. Children deprived of their liberty were particularly vulnerable to physical, psychological and sexual violence. The need to ensure effective monitoring and regular access to justice institutions by independent bodies empowered to conduct unannounced visits, and interviews with children and staff, was raised. Serious concern in relation to the ongoing trend of inhuman sentences for crimes committed by individuals under the age of 18 years was expressed, including the death penalty and life imprisonment, as well as cases of juvenile torture and ill-treatment of children in police custody.

#### **V. Concluding remarks and recommendations**

36. **In her concluding remarks and responses to the discussion, Dr. Hadj Salah emphasized that violence against children was a pressing issue throughout the world, and prevention was a key to its elimination. It was important to mobilize all stakeholders, including national and international entities, to assess the extent of the problem in order to decide how to address it. Legal instruments were crucial to ending violence and alleviating the consequences, while there was also a need to build a culture of non-violence. In relation to violence at school, teachers had to be made aware of the seriousness of corporal punishment and the effect of humiliation as a**

form of punishment. Children should be encouraged to report their concerns and worries.

37. With regard to children in situations of conflict, the Ombudsman on the Rights of the Child of the Russian Federation, Mr. Astakhov, emphasized that the need to protect children should be seen as more important than any political agenda. Children whose parents had been killed must be offered aid and provided with humanitarian assistance.

38. Mr. Freyre of the Latin American and Caribbean Movement for Children emphasized the importance of prevention as well. In Latin America and the Caribbean, corporal punishment was one of the most pervasive forms of violence, and there should be a legal framework preventing such treatment. In the past 18 months, six States had adopted legislation in this regard. It now had to be implemented, together with a shift in cultural attitudes to stop corporal punishment and physical humiliation. Investment in children was also vital so that programmes could be implemented and children could develop and flourish. Policies and programmes aimed at combating violence against children should be implemented in an integrated, non-discriminatory and universal way. He referred to the third Optional Protocol of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, on a communications procedure, as an important mechanism to give a voice to children.

39. Ms. Khondkar of Save the Children – Liberia discussed the inclusion of violence against children in the post-2015 development agenda, and called upon the Human Rights Council to become a strong advocate in this regard. Inclusion in this agenda would ensure focused investment, commitment and results in all countries. More than 12,000 children had been consulted regarding their views on the agenda, and they had come back with a clear vision of a world without violence. At the national level, political commitment was needed to combat the problem, including regular data collection and the involvement of all ministries relating to children, with the most relevant ministry playing a coordinating role. Families should be supported, including by developing parenting skills to learn positive ways to discipline children. Men and boys should also be involved in reducing violence against children and women. Awareness should be raised about gender stereotyping, which began at a very early stage.

40. Mr. Mezmur, the Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and Chairperson of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, emphasized that any solution to violence against children should combine affordability, cost-effectiveness and sustainability with non-discrimination, accountability, participation and impact. The importance of regional bodies in ending violence against children could not be overemphasized, and the importance of institutional relationships and collaboration should also be noted. Political will was needed to overcome violence against children, including by accepting the universal periodic review recommendations on this topic and adopting legislation on prohibition, but also by ensuring that budget cuts did not impede the realization of children's rights.

41. Remedies and accountability were vital. The ratification of the third Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child should continue, as should awareness-raising and supporting families in preventing violence. Violence against children should be a key issue in the post-2015 development agenda, and children should be involved in its development. Mr. Mezmur concluded that it took a village to raise a child, but a global village to raise a child free from violence.

42. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children stated that one important lesson from the Millennium Development Goals was that countries suffering from violence lagged behind in terms of child mortality, school attendance, health and other indicators. This situation could be turned around. Violence was one of the key concerns expressed by all, and was included as a systematic concern in all reports developed in the lead-up to the post-2015 development agenda. The Human Rights Council should keep it at the centre of its debate and as a cross-cutting issue. Violence against children should also continue to be raised during the universal periodic review process.

43. In order to eradicate violence against children, acceptance of and passivity towards violence had to be overcome. A clear strategy and political will were required. Better data and research to understand the impact on children and development were needed to implement such a strategy. Children had to be empowered so that, instead of being just the victims of violence, they could become the actors in initiatives to prevent it as well. Eliminating violence against children was a global effort; it could not be solved by the intervention of a few. All should join hands to build a world where violence had no place.

44. The moderator thanked Algeria for bringing the issue of violence against children before the Human Rights Council. She summarized the main points made during the panel discussion and debate:

- The underlying causes and effects of violence against children must be assessed in order to combat it successfully
  - Legal frameworks play an important part in social change, but traditional practices and culture often have an impact on the realization of children's rights and must be addressed
  - Solutions should be tailored to individual situations rather than involve a "one-size-fits-all" approach
  - Birth registration must be addressed as an urgent concern, in order to make children visible
  - Violence against children must be central to the post-2015 development agenda
  - The Human Rights Council must keep the issue of violence against children high on its agenda and support the mobilization of necessary resources
-