

## **Stockholm Congress: Opening Statement**

### **Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)**

I am pleased to speak on behalf of UNICEF in this World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children. I want to begin by paying tribute to the dedicated people who worked so hard on organizing and planning this Congress -- the folks of ECPAT, the NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the government of Sweden, our gracious host and partner for this important event.

This meeting breaks new ground. For the first time on a global level, we come together to confront the commercial sexual exploitation of children. We are here to affirm, without compromise, that children are not property to be bought and sold, that their human rights are to be taken with utmost seriousness, and that their voices must be heard in the fulfillment of those rights.

This Congress must send a clear and unequivocal message: the commercial sexual exploitation of children must end -- in every urban centre, every rural community, every corner of the world.

Well over a century has passed since most nations abolished slavery. Well over a century has also gone by since the first laws regulating child labour were passed. Yet today, exploitation of children persists in many forms. Children are bought and sold as sexual and economic commodities. They are trafficked within and across borders like contraband, imprisoned in brothels and forced to submit to large numbers of sex exploiters.

Whether they are hidden away or offer sex openly in doorways and railway stations, bars and beaches, sexually exploited children are tragically invisible. *We are here to make them visible; to declare that this gross violation of the human rights of children cannot be allowed to continue.*

Built on greed and the abuse of power, the commercial sexual exploitation of children has become a global, multi-billion dollar industry. Specific manifestations vary from society to society, but this abhorrent practice takes place in virtually every country. Indeed, the business of child sexual exploitation appears to be booming, and the richest countries are no exception. It is even becoming "high-tech", with child pornography, sex tourism information and mail-order brides offered openly on the Internet. We are also seeing increasing sexual exploitation of children in wars and refugee situations.

The effects of sexual exploitation on children are profound, sometimes permanent. Normal sexual, physical and emotional development is compromised. Self-esteem and confidence are undermined. The vast majority of sexually exploited children are denied their right to education -- even to the smallest moments of leisure and play. They are inadequately protected, often punished by the very laws and officials there to protect them. Younger and younger children are being sought for sex in the mistaken belief that the client's risk of HIV infection will be lessened. More often than not, the children are branded as morally reprehensible, ostracized by their families and communities. Violence, drugs and sexually transmitted diseases only heighten their vulnerability.

We have come together to put a stop to this. Strengthening international cooperation and action at every level of every society is crucial. Identifying and bringing to justice culpable individuals and criminal networks is essential.

But it is often the very adults entrusted with the care and protection of children who permit and perpetuate this intolerable practice. There are teachers, childcare workers, health professionals, police officers, politicians, and members of the clergy who use their prestige and authority to sexually exploit children.

Sometimes, the betrayal of children's trust goes even deeper. There is strong evidence that sexual abuse *in the home* -- by parents, other relatives, or neighbours -- vastly increases the abused child's risk of commercial sexual exploitation. If we want to end the sexual exploitation of children, we must combat it in the private as well as in the public sphere.

There is also the gender dimension. *Girls* are clearly the vast majority of victims. The low status of girls and women in society permits and perpetuates their sexual exploitation. Only by ensuring girls and women

full equality and opportunity in all spheres of life can we begin to get to the roots of this dehumanizing practice. Racial inequality and ethnic discrimination must also be confronted -- they often determine who is sexually exploited, who is spared.

In many countries, rapid urbanization, growing poverty, break-up of traditional families, loss of community, widespread environmental degradation, consumerist values and sensationalist mass media all contribute to an environment in which the commercial sexual exploitation of children flourishes.

What is to be done?

\* **We must shine light on the problem** -- public information campaigns, increased media coverage, more sophisticated monitoring and sharing of information, educating children about the problem from an early age (at home and in school), public exposure of perpetrators... all this is needed. Education is especially important.

\* **We must emphasize prevention** -- Community-based early warning and support systems are needed so that children are not abused and do not fall between the cracks, and families are less likely to be tricked or to sell their children into prostitution. More vigorous policies and programmes are needed to combat the poverty and other injustices that perpetuate sexual exploitation.

\* **We must identify and stop those who exploit and profit from this** -- adequate legislation, better law enforcement, stepped-up international cooperation to apprehend perpetrators, better-organized and more vigilant communities are needed.

\* **We must help children who are in the sex market** -- We must help them find productive and healthy alternatives, to help reintegrate them into their communities. But in the meantime, we must also help them while they are still in the sex trade. They need health care and information, skills training and education, protection from violence, psychological counselling, programmes against substance abuse, and love and acceptance by society.

There is no single remedy to this complex problem. Solutions must arise from the diverse national, local and cultural realities in which the commercial sexual exploitation of children is grounded. The diversity of approaches that are required was something that came through clearly from the six regional consultations that UNICEF helped organize in the lead-up to this Congress.

Fortunately, we are not starting from zero. If we look at the work that is already underway to improve the overall well-being of children worldwide, we can see that **significant energy and experience exists on which we can and must build.**

Nearly all countries have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention *obligates* countries to take effective measures to protect all children from all forms of exploitation and abuse, including commercial sexual exploitation. We are encouraged to see that quite a few countries are passing new child legislation, creating special bodies to protect child rights, reforming juvenile justice systems, training police, cracking down on sexual exploiters of children, and taking other actions to protect and assist children who are especially at risk.

But while government action is key, civil society must also move the rights contained in the Convention from words to deeds, and transform this international treaty from a legal instrument into a social tool.

As concern for child rights grows into a global movement, there is more pressure to protect the rights of those children in especially difficult circumstances -- children in war... children performing hazardous or exploitative labour... children working and living on the street... children in extreme poverty... indigenous and disabled children... girls who drop out of school. We must ensure that that commercial sexual exploitation, to which these children are all vulnerable, also becomes a high priority.

Non-governmental organizations are often in the best position to provide assistance. UNICEF takes its hat off to the NGO community for having had the vision and the courage to take up the cause of sexually exploited children a long time ago, often when powerful interests preferred to keep it in the shadows.

UNICEF has supported a variety of initiatives in this area: preventive education for girls and their families in rural communities of northern Thailand... research on trafficking and sex tourism in Cambodia... police training in Nepal... a national campaign to end child prostitution in Brazil... HIV/AIDS and health promotion for street children in Kenya and Tanzania -- to mention a few such efforts, some of them quite encouraging in their initial results.

We are in the process of updating policies and strategies regarding child protection. While our actions will vary according to the particular situation, I can assure you that UNICEF and its over 140 field offices will be an effective partner. And I emphasize **partner, for only by joining with others -- governments, NGOs, other international and bilateral development agencies, communities, the private sector and importantly, children themselves, can this problem begin to be tackled.** This Congress drives home the unequivocal need for complementarity, collaboration, cooperation, and full committed partnership by all of us.

This Congress is an announcement to the world that the commercial sexual exploitation of children is a global matter that can no longer remain in the shadows of the world's consciousness. *No government, no community, no family, can either pretend that it does not exist or justify its existence.*

Over the next few days, we will all be learning from one another. We will discover, together, what works best and what needs to be done. UNICEF is proud to be part of this initiative and I wish all of you a productive and energizing meeting.