

Stockholm Congress: OPENING STATEMENT

Wambui Njuguna, NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child

We send you greetings from the NGO Community.

Seventy heads of State met in 1990 at the World Summit for Children and took a joint commitment to give every child a better future. They continued to pledge: *We will work to ameliorate the plight of millions of children who live under specially difficult circumstances.*

Among these children are child victims of commercial sexual exploitation.

Despite these commitments, children have not been spared sexual abuse and exploitation.

It is for this reason that the NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a group of 38 international NGOs formed during the drafting process of the Convention, would like to extend its gratitude to the Government of Sweden for agreeing to host this meeting and to the Swedish host committee for its support throughout this process. The organization of this meeting has for the first time seen a fruitful cooperation between NGOs, governments and inter-governmental organizations. This is collaboration in practice and for that we are most grateful.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child provides for the rights of all children. The Convention specifically provides for the right of the child under 18 years to protection from sexual abuse and exploitation including prostitution and involvement in pornography. The Convention also provides for protection against trafficking. In Article 39 of the Convention the State parties have undertaken to provide recovery services and social reintegration of victims of abuse and exploitation.

We do realize that most countries are now state parties to the Convention and that almost all countries are attempting to implement what is being proposed in the Convention. However, coming from a developing world NGO, I am aware of the limitations that hinder the implementation of the Convention.

Despite the near universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have not been protected from sexual abuse and exploitation. What we are seeing is a resurgence of children in need. It is no longer a surprise to see a large number of our children roaming our streets, which are venues highly associated with sexual exploitation of children. This is not to say that child prostitution is only street-based for in some parts of the world children are locked away in slavery-like conditions in brothels, or are being sexually exploited in hotels, motels, bars and beaches. The number of children in situations of armed conflict has increased greatly worldwide. Conflicts and war are always accompanied by poverty, hunger and desperation. This may force children into prostitution, forcing them to offer sex for food or shelter, for protection or for refugee status for themselves and sometimes their families. Child prostitution has also been known to occur where there is a concentration of military forces and following the arrival of peace-keeping forces.

Child prostitution may be seen as child labour and one that is very hazardous in nature. Children have been trafficked from conflict situations to work in brothels in other countries. Children have also been trafficked to go and work as domestic workers in other countries only to realize that they were actually ending up in prostitution. In our situations for example girls who come to urban centers to work as domestic helpers sometimes end up in prostitution once they disagree with the employer and are kicked out.

Why despite all the commitments that have been made in the different fora have we been unable to protect our children or remove them from situations that make them vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse. There are several factors.

The displacement of children for various reasons is a common occurrence in many countries. Africa

for example is infested by conflicts which continue to push our children further in vulnerability. These conditions only expose children to exploitation and abuse.

In developing countries one important feature is that families are changing in structure and form. The traditional African culture for example allowed for community responsibility over children and nobody was left in need. The failure of the nuclear family to care for their children did not result in their suffering, they were always cushioned by the society or community. There were aunts, uncles, grand parents and other members of the community who protected children. A child belonged to the community and not to an individual. With rural-urban migration, this situation has totally changed making children more vulnerable to abuses. One even finds children being sexually abused in the home.

The economic hardships too are forcing some families to commercialize either the labour or sex of children.

Child prostitution has a lot of times been blamed on the tourists. The problem is however closer than we realize or dare to admit. I would like to emphasize here that child prostitution is first and foremost a local problem. A lot of the children in prostitution have as their clients local people. Unfortunately this is a problem we would like to sweep under the rug in many of our countries. The only way we can bring a light of day on what happens in these situations is if we focus on them while we are in this meeting. This meeting must address all perpetrators.

The other major factor we must all consider is that commercial sexual exploitation of children exists in almost all countries, north and south of the economic divide. There is a belief that child prostitution occurs because of poverty and for this reason a lot of people imagine it is prevalent only in developing countries. This is not true.

Commercial sexual exploitation of children poses serious life long consequences. First and foremost the practice endangers the children's mental and physical health and impairs all aspects of their development. It also exposes children to sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS and to child pregnancies with all their complications. We must be concerned that child prostitution leads to child pornography, and may involve torture, and also death.

This Congress is therefore timely since it provides an opportunity for Governments and NGOs to take stock of what is happening to children with regard to commercial sexual exploitation. When the idea of this congress was first proposed, it was clear to us that this would be an ideal opportunity -- not for creating new obligations for governments, but for assisting governments to implement existing obligations. The NGO Group for the Convention on the Right of the Child, therefore, values this meeting very much. The NGOs are partners in the Congress and the recommendations that come out we hope will be implemented in partnership.

The spirit of collaboration and working together between NGOs and Governments started at the point when we started making arrangements for the Congress. We have worked closely with our governments during these preparations and we are confident that much can be accomplished if NGOs and Governments work well. It is necessary that this happens because finally it is the children that matter. In this case we are talking of our children who are the future of our countries. Our actions of today will determine the future for these children.

By the Swedish Government response to host this Congress, and the presence of a large number of governments here today, political will has to a certain extent been demonstrated. However, from the NGO community what we would like to put to the Congress is that what we are going to discuss and recommend in this congress cannot be demonstrated and will be of no use back home, in our respective countries, if there is going to be no political will. We are hoping that the political will, already demonstrated by organizing this meeting and many governments attending, will be transported back to our respective countries. Experience in this field is relatively new and so all partners have much to learn.

I would like to thank our colleagues from ECPAT for launching the idea of this international congress and our colleagues in UNICEF for their support to NGOs in the preparatory process.

Finally, the NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child would like to thank all of you very much and assure you that we are looking forward to utilize the information and recommendations that will emerge from this important Congress.

We have an African saying that “the power of many hands and minds is unequaled”, which can also be translated as “unity is strength”. Let all of us here today unite to fight the evil of commercial sexual exploitation of our children. Together we will win. Thank you.