

Stockholm Congress: Keynote address

Dr Peter Piot, Executive Director, UNAIDS

Dear colleagues,

It is encouraging to see such a turnout here in Stockholm. The presence of so many representatives from governments, inter-governmental agencies and non-governmental partners is a clear signal that the international community is ready to take collective action and put an end to the sale and purchase of children for sex.

Our thanks go to the Swedish Government for agreeing to host the first world congress on this theme, to ECPAT for initiating the idea, and to all three cosponsors - End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism, the NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and of course UNICEF, which is a cosponsor of our Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). All of them have done a great deal to raise awareness of the extent and dangers of the trade in children for sex.

On behalf of our programme, UNAIDS, I want to state that the commercial sexual exploitation of children is an atrocity. It has rightly been called the ultimate evil. It denies children their fundamental human rights. It has devastating psychological and physical consequences for them. It is a perversion of the natural order - adults should be there to protect and nurture children, not to take advantage of their emotionally and physically **vulnerable** state.

The link between AIDS and the sex trade in children

UNAIDS has a direct interest in putting an end to this exploitation. The AIDS epidemic has become both a cause and consequence of the trade in children.

Why a cause? While the prostitution of children has a long history, the demand for child partners may be growing because of fears and delusions about AIDS. For example, some men reportedly seek out children because they believe children are less likely to be infected than adult prostitutes.

And AIDS in turn has become an important consequence of the commercial sexual exploitation of children. Sex between a man and a child is particularly likely to transmit HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Because of the physical disproportion between the partners, a child who is not fully grown is more easily torn or damaged by penetrative sex, and this makes it easier for the virus to pass into the child's body. The immature membranes of a girl or a boy are also more porous to **viruses and bacteria**. And a child can't fight back, no matter how rough the sex or how long it lasts.

For all these reasons, children run a greater risk than adults do of becoming infected with HIV or with other diseases like syphilis or gonorrhoea by an infected client. Condom use could at least protect the children from these diseases, though it will not protect them from all the associated psychological and physical harm. However, children are weak, vulnerable and uninformed, and they are scarcely in a position to demand that the client should use a condom. Or to seek out medical care if they get injured or fall ill with a sexually transmitted disease.

So the millions of children who are sexually exploited now face the additional and fatal risk of AIDS. Many have already acquired HIV from their adult clients.

Over and above this group, the AIDS epidemic is impacting further millions of children through its conjunction with the sex trade.

For example, there are the children who are deeply affected by AIDS coming into their family as a result of sex work. Watching their father, or their mother, or a sister or brother fall ill and die of AIDS is a trauma for these children.

An even bigger group are the children who live in circumstances which make them vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation and hence vulnerable to AIDS. They may come from a family that is impoverished or greedy for commercial gain. Or their relatives may be uninformed and fall for the lies of recruiters who promise their children good jobs. Or the children may be forced into prostitution by threatened or actual violence to themselves or their families.

Solutions

Problems as grave, complex and far-reaching as these demand equally far-reaching solutions. They also call for the active participation of children themselves in both planning and implementation.

I would suggest seven urgent measures.

First, we need to remove children from situations in which they are sold and purchased for sex - a practice in clear violation of Article 34 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This will take the consolidated efforts of governments, nongovernmental organizations, the business sector, the media, religious groups, and communities - from rural villages to urban neighbourhoods. What they will need to provide, individually and collectively, are strong commitment and a sustained long-term infusion of people and money.

Second, laws against the sex trade in children must be made harsher and enforced vigorously. Publicizing the existence, severity and application of these laws is crucial to success. Punishing clients, procurers and other adults who break the law will demonstrate that the sexual exploitation of children is a serious crime - and deter potential exploiters. Here, I have three cautions, however. One is the need for vigilance to avoid confusing sex with a child and sex between consenting adults. Another caution is that sexual abusers of children may need therapeutic or rehabilitative measures - the punitive response may not be sufficient to eradicate individual pathological behaviour. And, my final caution, laws against the sex trade in children must not be used to punish children. Children who are involved in the sex traffic should be seen as children, not prostitutes or criminals.

The third measure I would advocate is to step up our public information campaigns against the commercial sexual exploitation of children. No individual, no family, no community must be unaware of the fatal AIDS risk to these children. No one must be unaware of the other torments inflicted on these children, who are beaten, locked up, and abused by clients. No one must remain unaware that children have fundamental rights that the world has agreed to protect from violation.

Fourth, if we are to have a chance of ultimate success, we must do more to change the traditions that place a low value on children and women and hence condone the traffic in girls and boys. We must make the sexual *abuse* of children purely and simply unacceptable in the minds of every man, woman and family. Public information campaigns are an important tool for changing attitudes, as we have seen in many other areas. The community must be in the front line of this particular battle, though governments have a leadership role.

Fifth, in areas where commercial sex takes place we must try harder to prevent HIV and cure the other sexually transmitted diseases like syphilis and gonorrhoea, which magnify HIV transmission.

This message, along with treatment for the STDs, must reach those infected. And condoms must be promoted aggressively - they are the only proven barrier against HIV. Of course our goal is to end the sexual exploitation of children. But as we proceed with urgency to rescue exploited children, we cannot shy away from the moral obligation to reduce their risk of infection with HIV and hence save their lives.

Sixth, we need to expand the range of support services available to children who suffer or have suffered from this kind of exploitation. Children with HIV and their families need health care including counselling, because the emotional consequences of AIDS are often as painful as the physical disease. Some families will need help with food, shelter and income generation; all will require assistance to meet the children's recreational and educational needs.

Seventh and last, we must find creative ways of making children and their families less vulnerable to being drawn into the sex trade. For example, through income-generation, promotion of rural industry and education policies, governments can reinforce families' resistance to the lure of commercial gain through the sale of their children. Religious groups, youth groups and other community-based organizations can help convince families and other members of the public who have yet to grasp the harsh penalties for selling and buying children and the torments suffered by children trapped in the sex trade.

Convention on the Rights of the Child

But these seven measures cannot be seen or implemented in isolation from the protection of all the rights that are recognized in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention reminds us that people under the age of 18 are special - they are children. They must be given the time and opportunity to develop. They must be protected from *all* forms of abuse - let us not forget that, tragically, most sexual abuse takes place in the home. And they must be protected from *all* forms of commercial exploitation by adults. Just look around the world. When children lack a healthy environment, access to health care, education and recreation, and minimum standards of food, clothing and shelter, they become particularly vulnerable to exploitation. This is why the rights of the child are interlinked and indivisible, and why our fight to protect children must be based on not only Article 34 but all the articles of the Convention.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with a story told by Mettanando Bhikkhu, a Buddhist monk from Thailand. As this audience knows, Thailand is a country whose government has had the courage to acknowledge and tackle the problem of commercial sexual exploitation of children, with notable success in a number of provinces.

A woman approached a Buddhist monk, and said: "When I was 12, my parents, who were very poor, sold me to a brothel and I have had to do this work ever since. I must beg your forgiveness for my sin."

The monk replied; "There is no need to beg forgiveness from me. It is I and the world who should beg your forgiveness, for we have not done enough to protect you. Please forgive me and the world for having failed to protect you in the first place."

Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, we as adults are responsible for the state of this world. Let us not fail our children.