

Keynote Address by Cherry Kingsley on behalf of the NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child

Your Royal Highness, distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen, Youth Delegates:

Allow me to start by saying that it is a profound honour to be representing the NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which represents some 50 NGOs around the world and such an honour to give the keynote address on an issue of deep, personal importance to myself.

Firstly, I would like to tell you about myself for just a moment. I am a survivor of commercial sexual exploitation. I grew up in the sex trade in Canada from the age of 14 to 22. During those eight years in the sex trade most of my friends died; they died from drugs, AIDS, violence, murder and some from suicide.

I tell you this because I think that while we are here for four days we should be reminded of how serious the conditions are for children who are commercially sexually exploited. We are privileged to be in such a beautiful city in the comfort of nice hotels and beautiful meeting spaces to ponder our commitments to end the commercial sexual exploitation of children while millions of children live in horrific conditions without the chance to reflect or to give voice. Truly, our commitments must go beyond the issue and to the children themselves.

All of us here will say that sexual exploitation of children is a heinous abuse and violation of children and their basic human rights as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. What we have to do is get beyond voicing outrage and move towards more practical and meaningful solutions. If we ever hope to affect the lives of children who have been sexually exploited and protect those most vulnerable, we must first understand the vulnerabilities of children and the experience of those whom have been exploited.

Crucial to this understanding is the voice of vulnerable and exploited children. I believe their voices must become central to our actions against the sexual exploitation of children. If you see us only as victims you have missed the point. We could be leaders, indeed many of us are. In my case I must thank the Government of Canada for their belief and support and Save the Children for their resources to enable me to have a voice and translate my experiences into actions.

Indeed there has been progress. The first World Congress brought the plight of commercial sexual exploitation of Children into public view and put it onto government and international agendas. When I attended the first World Congress (I was sponsored by UNICEF) I was a rare voice of experience and I think standing here today without fear or shame symbolizes the movement from survivor/victim to healing and empowerment. But I also must acknowledge with sadness many millions of children who live in utter despair, and whose voices will never be heard and who will not survive their exploitation.

I am an indigenous person of Canada. My culture has been an important part of my healing. We have a belief that children are born into the circle of family, community, culture and nation. We do not have to earn our right or be grateful for our place. We are not passive recipients but active important citizens and most importantly (often forgotten) members of the human race.

We have another belief; when we come to the circle, behind us stand seven generations of our ancestors and before us stands seven generations of our future.

I then come to this circle and behind me stands seven generations of exploited children and unless we act before me also stand seven generations of children and youth who will be exploited.

Children are born looking to us with love and hope, whether we deserve it or not. When they are made vulnerable because they are poor, homeless, without family, hungry, abused, living in countries affected by war or discriminated because of race, gender or sexuality they still look to

us with hope that we will protect them and that somehow somewhere they are cherished regardless of status or circumstance. Sadly, the commercial sexual exploitation of children is a part of the continuum we know as the sexual exploitation of children taking place in both the commercial and non-commercial in the family and the community.

I think through concrete action we can honour that hope: Recognize those most vulnerable and protect them.

When commercial sexual exploitation is happening develop respectful non-punitive interventions for children and hold those responsible for buying, selling, and facilitating the exploitation of children accountable. We must stop jailing our exploited children. Fund and resource exiting and healing programs for children and youth who are exploited. Fund and resource monitoring mechanisms. We must continually understand the effects of our efforts. All commitments and actions must be visible, Government, NGOs, public and especially children need to know that we are committed to ending the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children. We must send the message to the public and our children that we will not tolerate the children being exploited that we will help them rather than punish them. If children and youth hear this message perhaps they will not be so afraid to come forward and ask for help. Engage Young People in the development of law policy programs and services. By supporting our Commercially Sexually Exploited Youth we send a message that we know what is happening, we are sorry we let you down and we care and we want you to be safe and free. If we ever hope to have peace in this world it will be because we have raised our children knowing peace. There can never be peace without justice and human rights. There are no human rights or justice when our children are bought and sold to satisfy the greed and lust of adults. If we can convince through education and consequence, the adults to stop buying and selling our children, indeed half the battle is won. A young girl once told me that the commercial sexual exploitation of children is a reflection of the sickness in the soul of society. We must help our children to be protected and those hurt to heal, and we must heal our own weaknesses that prevent us from protecting our children.

As we struggle for solutions to end the commercial sexual exploitation of children, we may find that it is the children that have been exploited that show us the way.