

Keynote address by Carol Bellamy, Executive Director, UNICEF

Mr. President, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates - and the Children and Young People whose participation is at the heart of the struggle to promote and protect child rights:

Let me begin by extending our deep appreciation to the Government of Japan for hosting this Second World Congress against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children. It is fitting that this meeting be held in Japan, given this country's longstanding efforts to help break the silence surrounding these shameful abuses of child rights -- as well as its early and ongoing support of programmes to eradicate child sexual abuse and to assist exploited children.

On behalf of UNICEF, I also want to thank the many other partners who have made this event possible, including our fellow co-organisers, ECPAT International and the NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Allow me, Mr. President, to single out the Government of Sweden, the European Union and the Japan Committee for UNICEF for their important contributions. And finally, I want to pay tribute to the many representatives of civil society and the private sector who are with us -- especially the NGO community, whose work in extending assistance and raising public awareness began long ago - and has immeasurably advanced the cause of sexually exploited and abused children.

Mr. President, five years ago in Stockholm, governments and civil society sent a forceful and unequivocal message: that children are not property to be bought and sold; that they have fundamental rights that must be promoted and protected - and that in fulfilling those rights, their voices must be heard and acted upon.

We have seen significant progress since that first World Congress. Thanks to the Stockholm Declaration and Agenda for Action, there is now greater public awareness of the appalling scale of the commercial sexual exploitation of children, which afflicts every corner of the world, from the richest countries to the most impoverished.

Most importantly, we have seen how the exercise of leadership, by governments as well as by every level of civil society, can advance the cause of child rights - in this case the right of every child to be protected from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Mr. President, the lion's share of responsibility for ensuring child rights and well-being rests with governments at the highest level -- and those obligations are set forth in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, a treaty, ratified by almost every country on Earth, that proclaims the right of all children to be protected against dangers that hamper their growth and development. These include armed conflict and disability to racial and ethnic discrimination, and all forms of neglect, cruelty and exploitation.

It is in line with those principles that in the last five years, nearly 50 countries have moved to draw up national plans of action to combat sexual exploitation and assist victims. Measures range from the establishment of special bodies to protect child rights; reform of juvenile-justice systems; training of police and judicial authorities; and all-out crackdowns on those who sexually exploit children.

Japan, for example, has approved new laws designed to punish those involved in child prostitution and pornography, including those who abduct or traffic in children; to protect child victims of such abuse, and to educate officials and the general public about the surpassing importance of child rights.

Because of such steps, we have seen an increase in police actions growing out of cooperation among national law enforcement groups and Interpol.

We have seen stepped-up involvement by the private sector, particularly in the tourism and Internet-service industries.

We are seeing the commitment of more resources on a regional basis to combat sexual exploitation, in line with efforts like those of the European Commission.

At the global level, we have seen the adoption of three major treaties that address sexual exploitation and abuse: ILO Convention No. 182, which calls the involvement of children in prostitution and pornography one of the worst forms of child labour; the Protocol on the prevention of trafficking of children and others, part of the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime; and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in this case a measure aimed at ending the sale of children, as well as child prostitution and child pornography. The Protocol will enter into force next month, thanks to the example set by the first 10 countries that have ratified the Protocol: Andorra, Bangladesh, Cuba, Iceland, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Norway, Panama, Romania and Sierra Leone.

Finally, Mr. President, we are seeing a greater emphasis on the role of children and young people themselves in ending commercial sexual exploitation and abuse. It is a trend dramatised by young people's conferences recently in Manila and Victoria, Canada -- and just this week in Kawasaki City.

Mr. President, these are occasions that give exploited youth a voice in the fight to eliminate some of the most difficult and shocking obstacles to the realization of child rights. Participants are vocal, they are visible - and yet they are not re-victimized or sensationalized. They feel safe in sharing their stories. We need to be guided by such participation, not only because it is a basic right, but because it will help us find ways to repair the deep damage that is done to sexually exploited children.

That is why we are eager to hear what the young people have to say about the outcome of the Kawasaki City proceedings.

And yet, Mr. President, for all these advances since Stockholm, sexual exploitation for profit continues to affect millions of children worldwide. Indeed, while there is relatively little official data, we have every reason to believe that the commercial sexual exploitation of children is on the rise - and that the universal extent of the problem is still shrouded in silence.

The proliferation of armed conflict and the displacement of whole populations; widening disparities within countries and around the world; increased consumerism, widening of communication networks including roads, air transport and electronic and satellite media and connections between individuals and groups -- all help create conditions that fuel rising demand.

There is also mounting evidence of a complex link between child sexual exploitation and the ongoing spread of HIV/AIDS in the developing world and among the countries of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Children forced into the sex trade -- estimated at a million a year -- are exceptionally vulnerable to contracting the virus that causes AIDS. The high infection rates among teen-age girls in some hard-hit countries appear to be linked to a belief among HIV-positive men that they can cure themselves by having sex with virgins.

And data presented by African delegates at a recent preparatory meeting in Rabat suggest that a vast number of children who have lost one or both parents to HIV/AIDS become sex workers out of desperation.

Mr. President, it is hard to imagine a more difficult and shocking obstacle to the realisation of human rights than the commercial sexual exploitation of children. Yet it is only one element of the even more pervasive and deeply rooted problem of sexual abuse, which often begins in the home, at the hands of a close relative or friend.

Children who are sexually abused find their world turned upside down. It makes enemies out of the very people children look to for protection -- those they know, love and trust. And because it can happen where children live, learn and play, familiar places like home or school can become forbidding and dangerous.

The desperate vulnerability of such children is only heightened by endemic factors like violence, drugs and sexually transmitted diseases.

The vast majority are also denied their right to education - and even to the briefest moments of leisure and play. Because they are fearful of further abuse, including abuse by the authorities, such children typically have little recourse to the law. And those who return home may find themselves stigmatised by their own families and communities.

Mr. President, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates: All this must stop -- and together we will see that it does.

To succeed, we must strengthen international cooperation and action at every level of every society. Governments and especially media outlets must have the courage to end, once and for all, the shameful silence that keeps commercial exploitation and abuse a secret.

That means shining light on the problem, using public information campaigns, increased media coverage, more sophisticated monitoring and sharing of information, educating children about sexual abuse from an early age at home and in school.

And we must move forcefully to identify and bring to justice culpable individuals and criminal networks. 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.

Education is especially important. There is also the fact that girls are clearly the vast majority of victims, a consequence of their low status of girls 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 and who is spared.

That is why UNICEF's basic approach to the crisis of child sexual exploitation is two-fold: to decrease the risks of sexual abuse and exploitation through full access to education and adequate legislation; and to ensure that children trapped in abusive or exploitative situations are not only freed from those situations, but that they have access to legal aid, protection, secure housing, economic assistance, counselling, and health and social services, including help in making a physical and psychological recovery from their ordeal.

This includes addressing the plight of child labourers working as domestic servants. These children -- bonded, lent or sold -- comprise some of the most vulnerable and exploited of all, and the most difficult to protect. Trafficking in young girls for domestic work has reached crisis proportions in West and Central Africa, where millions of children - some as young as 5 - may be involved.

Global partnerships are crucial. To this end, UNICEF supports the global NGO Support Group, which links key NGOs with United Nations partners, including the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Such partnerships are already helping to improve legislative measures, law enforcement and programmes for the recovery of children through alternative education and employment opportunities.

There is also a three-year inquiry by the UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention that is focusing on the global role played by organised crime.

But the fact is, Mr. Chairman, we already know a great deal about what must be done to eliminate sexual trafficking and abuse of children.

Only by ensuring girls and women full equality and opportunity in all spheres of life can we begin to attack the roots of the practice. Racial inequality and ethnic discrimination must also be confronted, for they are factors that often determine who is sexually exploited and who is spared.

In all of this, we need to strengthen international cooperation and action at every level of every society. This includes working together to identify and bring to justice culpable individuals and criminal networks.

In this connection, we must recognise that the betrayal of children's trust can occur close to home. Sexual abuse by parents, other relatives or neighbours - itself an abuse of children's rights - heightens the risk of subsequent exploitation. The silence and embarrassment that tend to surround this issue do not help.

Mr. Chairman, if we want to end the sexual exploitation of children, we must emphasise prevention, including community-based early warning and support systems to ensure that children are not abused, and that families are less likely to be tricked or deluded into selling their children into bondage of any kind.

Finally, we must help children who have been exploited to find productive and healthy alternatives, and to rejoin their communities as responsible citizens. For this they need health care and information, skills training and education, protection from violence, psychological counselling, programmes against substance abuse – and above all, love and acceptance.

Mr. Chairman, the global movement that produced the Convention on the Rights of the Child has helped generate pressure to protect the rights of all children, including children in war; children performing hazardous or exploitative labour; children exposed to violence; children in extreme poverty; and indigenous and disabled children.

Now it is up to all of us - including governments, law enforcement; international organisations; and all levels of civil society - to see to it that the elimination of commercial sexual exploitation is accorded the same urgent priority.

Thank you.