

Keynote address by Jo de Linde, Chairperson of ECPAT International

Stockholm, August 1996. Yokohama, December 2001. Two great cities -two dates to remember - two important congresses affecting the lives of children.

I am honoured and pleased to address this opening session of the Second World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children.

Honoured because ECPAT, the international organisation working to end child prostitution, child pornography and trafficking in children for sexual purposes, was the initiator of the first World Congress. Drawing on the strength of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Declaration and Plan of Action adopted then continues to be an inspiration for national plans of action and other practical measures to improve the lives of children everywhere.

Pleased because the unique partnership of government, inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations formed for the Stockholm Congress has worked successfully again for Yokohama: a concrete and welcome example of the kind of partnership needed to be really effective.

I would like to congratulate the Government of Japan for hosting this Congress, and thank the co-organisers who have spared no effort to ensure it will be an event that will change the lives of children for the better.

In Stockholm in 1996, the commercial sexual exploitation of children was exposed and denounced as unacceptable. It is as unacceptable today as it was then.

Five years on, we are meeting again to see what has been done, what remains to be done and to pledge renewed action to put an end to the unacceptable. There are now many more of us working to make this happen. We have more information, more expertise. There are also more victims. This time, we cannot pretend we did not know.

The world has changed dramatically in the past 5 years.

If recent tragic events are seen as an attack on all that civilisation stands for, so must the sexual abuse and exploitation of children for profit. If international co-operation and collaboration can be mobilised to improve security, encourage world trade and promote major sporting events, then surely they can be mobilised on the same scale on behalf of children. This time, we cannot pretend we did not see.

Many young people are taking part in this Congress. I am sure they have much to teach us. As representatives of young people they are the ones whose voices will be heard. To them and to all those children and young people who are NOT here, whose voices may never be heard: our message to you at the opening of this Congress is clear: For us, you remain at the top of the political agenda and we intend to keep you there. This time we cannot pretend we did not hear.

Nelson Mandela and Graca Machel in their promise to the world's children say: "You are the focus of our outrage, just as you are the focus of our hope. You are our only children, our only link to the future."

In our global society, children and young people are referred to in many different ways: as the future of the nation, potential consumers or clients, investment opportunities with 'almost' guaranteed returns. While it is true children represent the future and that, of course, they are an important factor in the economic and social development of any country, they are first and foremost human beings; valuable and precious in their own right, to be cherished, protected, educated, encouraged and fulfilled.

You have probably all heard about Harry Potter by now! Learning to become a wizard takes him into some very strange and stressful situations! One day, Professor Dumbledore, the headmaster

of Hogwarts School for Wizards says to him: "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."

A quote from the world of make-believe, but how true!

We have made a choice in coming to Yokohama. If we are here today, it is because we know what leads to the commercial sexual exploitation of children; we know who are the most vulnerable; we know how it can be eliminated.

This Congress offers us the opportunity to do just that; to end the commercial sexual exploitation of children: because they are human beings; because they are the future; because it is unacceptable for children to be treated in this way; and because there are enough people in the world who believe passionately that it is possible to do something about it. That is why we are here.

So much for choice. What about abilities?

We have a chance to display ours in the days ahead. How will the world -- how will children -- judge our efforts to live up to the good intentions, the declarations, the promises, made in Stockholm five years ago and again now? What will history say about the outcome of the Yokohama Congress? Did we just talk? Did we take effective action? Did we make a real difference to the lives of children?

There is no magic formula, but I firmly believe we can succeed this time if we combine the right choices with our many abilities, to make a real and lasting difference to the lives of children everywhere.