

# **Working Together for the Protection of Children**

## **National Conference Male', Maldives**



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Violence against Children**

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Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Dear Friends,

I would like to convey to you all my very best wishes for a very successful Conference on Child Protection. It is with deep regret that I am unable to join you in person, but I will be following your deliberations with special interest, confident they will be also encouraging significant developments in other countries of the world.

I would like to commend the Government of Maldives for its decisive leadership in the organization of this Conference. As Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, I am a strong supporter of national initiatives designed to strengthen national child protection systems. Robust child protection laws and policies, with well-coordinated and well-resourced institutions and services, go a long way in safeguarding children from violence, and are indispensable to build a cohesive society where violence has no place.

This National Conference gains a special relevance in the framework of the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and of the strong commitments made by the Maldives to move forward the recommendations of the United Nations Study on Violence against Children.

Maldives has taken a number of important steps to protect children's rights, as shown by the strong emphasis on advancing human rights in the new Constitution, the establishment of Family and Child Services Centers in all Atolls in order to reach the most vulnerable populations, the establishment of a minimum social protection programme and the creation of the Maldives Child Protection Data base. These are crucial steps I warmly welcome.

I would also like to acknowledge the important role that the Maldives has assumed at both the regional and international level. Maldives is an active member of the South Asia Initiative to End Violence against Children (SAIEVAC), a high-level regional cooperation framework that has my decisive support. The country has also recently been elected to the United Nations Human Rights Council and I am confident that, with your strong leadership and support, the protection of children's rights, including from all forms of violence, will gain a renewed attention in the agenda of that important United Nations body. I look forward to cooperating with the government of the Maldives also in that important framework.

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Dear Friends

Over the recent past, a number of significant developments have placed the protection of children high in the policy agenda. Firstly, the High-Level Meeting on South-South Cooperation on Child Rights in Asia and the Pacific, held in Beijing, in November 2010 and in which the Maldives was highly represented, provided a strategic occasion to share national experiences and reflect on good practices and lessons learned to enhance the realization of children's rights and children's protection from violence. The Beijing Declaration, adopted by all participating governments, calls for a systematic approach to addressing child protection concerns based on laws and policies that safeguard children from potential harm and ban all forms of violence against children. It expresses commitment to strengthening adequately-resourced national child protection and welfare systems and mechanisms, including for the prevention of violence, the establishment of timely and appropriate responses, and the mitigation of impact on children and their families of such protection concerns. I am confident that these commitments will help to frame your deliberations and will serve as a reference for the actions you are all committed to pursue.

Secondly, also in November, the Governing Body of the South Asia Initiative to Eliminate Violence against Children (SAIEVAC) met for the first time in Kathmandu, and adopted an impressive five-year strategic plan for the implementation of the recommendations of the UN Study on Violence against Children. Maldives played a decisive role in this process and will remain an influential catalyst in the region, including within the context of SAARC.

As you know, one of the strategic objectives of the SAIEVAC plan is the development in all States of a "comprehensive national strategy, policy or plan of action on violence against children which is integrated into the national planning process with realistic time-bound targets, adequate resources, and is coordinated and monitored by an agency with the human and financial capacity to involve multiple sectors." This is a strategic goal which will help

every country shape a vision and generate long term and sustained commitment to build a safe society where children can grow up free from violence. With strategic time-bound targets and informed by sound data and research, it provides a roadmap to mobilise action, resources and support, to stimulate and monitor progress and promote a process of lasting change. Such a strategy also helps to promote the engagement and effective cooperation of all areas of government relevant to address child protection concerns, avoiding dispersion of resources, overlap of activities and, above all, preventing that the most vulnerable children may be left behind and unattended.

In short, the commitments and the needed framework are all there. Our task is to take them forward, and translate them into real achievements for children.

This task is urgent: as we have learned from so many experiences around the world, where national child protection systems are absent or inadequate, it is increasingly evident that interventions to protect children's rights are carried out in isolation from other concerns, issues or vulnerabilities. Where there is disproportionate investment in response – as opposed to prevention – parallel and duplicate systems are created, coverage is inconsistent and quality is variable.

Dear Friends,

Available research leads us to believe that between 500 million and 1.5 billion children worldwide endure some form of violence every year. Violence takes place in all contexts, including where children are expected to enjoy a secure environment and special protection - in care institutions, in the school and also within the home. In some communities, traditional harmful practices, including forced and early marriage, are rooted in society and hard to abandon without the genuine mobilization and active involvement of those concerned.

Children experience neglect and trauma – when they witness domestic violence and when they endure intimidation, humiliation, physical aggression, abuse and exploitation. Younger children are at special risk, having less ability to speak up and seek support, and also greater chances of suffering irreversible emotional and health damage.

Violence against children has dramatic and serious consequences, reducing human capacity and compromising social development. And yet, it remains hidden and socially condoned. Widely perceived as a social taboo or a needed form of discipline, it is seldom reported; official statistics remain limited in their ability to capture the true scale and extent of this phenomenon; and, openly or implicitly, children feel pressed to conceal incidents of violence and abuse, particularly when perpetrated by people they know and trust. A culture of silence, secrecy and social indifference surrounds this phenomenon, paving the way to pervasive impunity.

This is a pattern we urgently need to reverse. The protection of children from all forms of violence needs to evolve from being a concern of a few into a priority for all.

Guided by this sense of urgency and by the opportunity of scaling up positive national initiatives promoted in this and other regions, in my work I am particularly committed to pursue three critical goals:

- The development in each country of a **national strategy** to prevent and respond to all forms of violence;
- The introduction of **legislation to prohibit all violence against children**; and
- The **consolidation of data and research** to help shape policy and action.

**Firstly, it is urgent to develop in every country a cohesive, well-coordinated and well-resourced national strategy to address violence against children.** A national strategy is more than a simple document; it sets out a vision and a navigation chart, mobilizing action, resources and civil society support to prevent and respond to all forms of violence against children.

To be effective, the strategy needs to be a core component of national policy agenda, coordinated by a high level focal point with leading responsibilities on children's issues, and authority to articulate activities across departments, and periodically evaluated to assess progress and impact.

Violence prevention and children's protection there from can be best addressed holistically; through the systematic and effective engagement of all relevant ministries and levels of public administration - from health, education and sports, to social affairs, from justice and home affairs, to planning, economy and finance. When coordination is effective and solutions benefit from the experience and expertise of individual sectors and disciplines, convergence of actions and judicious use of resources can be promoted; fragmented and reactive solutions can be avoided; and sound child protection systems can be strengthened to support children and families at greater risk; and, above all, to prevent violence altogether.

**Secondly, it is critical to introduce in every country an explicit legal ban on all forms of violence against children.** Legislation is a key component of a comprehensive national strategy. It is an expression of a country's commitment to work towards the prevention of violence and the protection of children's dignity and physical integrity. It encourages positive discipline and the education of children through non-violent means; provides protection to witnesses and victims, enables reporting and redress, and legitimizes assistance, recovery and reintegration.

Across countries, many challenges remain and violence against children is still often accepted as a lawful practice in the education system, as a form of sentencing by judicial bodies and as a disciplinary measure in care institutions. The gap between law and practice also remains wide and challenging. Protective legislation needs to be enforced, permeate the work of institutions and shape the training and ethical standards of professionals. It needs to involve and sensitize communities where harmful practices remain persistent to encourage change from within and a truly engaged commitment to the abandonment of those practices. And it also needs to promote easily accessible, child sensitive, confidential and independent counselling and complaint mechanisms for child victims of incidents of violence.

**Thirdly, research and data on violence against children need to be further strengthened.**

Information on violence against children is scarce and fails to represent the magnitude of this phenomenon across nations and social groups. But as recognized by significant studies also in this region, data and research are crucial to break the invisibility and social acceptance of violence against children, to understand social attitudes and risk factors, and to enhance the protection of those at risk. Moreover, data and research are indispensable to support government planning and budgeting for universal and effective child protection services; and to inform the development of evidence-based legislation, policies and actions for violence prevention and response.

No policy decision is neutral to children and when accurate data and sound analysis are available, there are stronger chances of adopting strategic and well informed decisions, and of investing in prevention, rather than simply reacting to incidents of violence that have already taken place. This is an area where urgent action is also required. Monitoring tools and indicators need to be expanded to include all children – boys and girls of all ages, and in all contexts and situations. And these efforts need to incorporate children’s views and perspectives, and be informed by their experience. This will help to gain a better understanding of the hidden face of violence and its root causes; and overall, to become more effective in our ability to prevent violence from happening in the first place.

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Dear Friends,

Violence compromises the life of millions of children around the world and is associated with profound social costs. But, as we have learned from the many successful initiatives promoted in all regions, violence is not inevitable; it can be prevented and effectively addressed.

With a well-resourced strategic national agenda, a strong and effective legislation and sound data and evidence to understand risk factors and inform policy decisions, a world without violence can be built. Your leadership and political will are essential to move this process forward in the Maldives, and indeed in the South Asia region. I look forward to hearing about your important deliberations and working closely with you in the steps ahead.