

**High Level Global Conference on the Universal Prohibition of Corporal  
Punishment**

**30 May – 1 June 2018**

**Malta**

**STATEMENT BY THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY GENERAL  
ON VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN**

**Marta Santos Pais**

Madame President,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Guests,

Dear friends,

It is an honour to participate in this high-level Conference and to feel deeply inspired by the commitment and energy you all bring to guarantee a childhood free from corporal punishment for all children.

Allow me to start by expressing my deep gratitude to Her Excellency the President of Malta for her inspiring leadership and tireless efforts to safeguard the rights of the child and to ensure children's effective protection from violence.

Most sincere congratulations also to the government of Malta for its strong leadership in promoting this initiative. We warmly welcome the high attention being given to the elimination of corporal punishment of children in Malta, and salute your strong efforts to mobilizing other States towards the prevention and elimination of violence against children.

I would also like to acknowledge the critical role played by Sweden and Austria, which hosted the two previous global conferences on this topic. Thanks to the leadership you have all demonstrated, the alliance around this goal is getting stronger and stronger and has brought us closer to ensuring that the right to freedom from violence becomes a reality for all children!

Allow me to commend equally the commitment demonstrated by the many governments, civil society partners and child rights defenders represented here today that continue to work so tenaciously to bring an end to corporal punishment, both at home and abroad.

Dear friends,

There have been many important milestones in our common journey to end violence against children. This journey saw a critical turning point with the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which made it a legal and ethical imperative to safeguard the right of every child to freedom from violence – all children, everywhere and at all times.

Informed by the implementation of the Convention, in 2006 the United Nations Study on Violence against Children took stock of the global scale and impact of violence against children, presenting clear recommendations for action. To keep these concerns high on the international and national policy agenda, and to ensure steady progress across regions, the UN established a new position of Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children – a position that I have been honoured to hold.

In 2015, with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the international community gave new impetus to children's freedom from violence. With the inclusion of a distinct target - Target 16.2 - to end all forms of violence against children, the 2030 Agenda made an historic breakthrough and conveyed an ambitious vision: by investing in children, and leaving no child behind, the world can create the conditions for children to grow up free from want, from fear and from violence.

But if we fail to safeguard children's safety and protection, the chance of reaching other sustainable goals and targets will be strongly compromised.

It is high time to end all forms of violence against children! This goal is within reach and there are countless experiences that can help us to achieve genuine momentum and steady progress.

Indeed, rather than being the concern of a few as it once was, violence against children is increasingly becoming a priority across borders. Over the past years, new commitments have been made and new alliances formed; new strategic plans on children's protection from violence guide action across nations; information and communication campaigns help to raise awareness of the negative impact of violence on child development. We have sound evidence on strategies that work and more and better data, allowing us to break the silence surrounding violence; to challenge its acceptance; to address its causes; and to advance progress to bring it to an end.

More importantly, visible strides have been made in legislation banning all forms of violence against children, including its use as a form of discipline, correction or punishment. Sweden broke new ground with its 1979 law; today, more than 50 states have enacted similar provisions, and in all regions many others are moving in the same direction.

Together with the Government of Mexico, we recently hosted a high-level Latin America meeting where national governments and institutions, civil society organizations and children themselves joined hands to document and advance progress in these important areas. The region may soon become the first in the world with a legal ban on all forms of violence in each and every country!

These are clearly encouraging developments. But the task at hand remains enormous. Indeed, the gap between norms and reality is wide, and we must move ahead with a deep sense of urgency!

Every five minutes, a child dies as a result of violence. Every year, over one billion children experience some form of violence – that is half of the world's children!

Violence remains hidden and pervasive. Reporting remains low and challenging for child victims, and laws and justice institutions seem too distant and too complex for them to trust and use. As children often tell me, proceedings are like a labyrinth... and there is no way out...

Dear friends,

Violence affects children of all ages and it often starts in early childhood. As highlighted by UNICEF's recent report '*A Familiar Face*', shouting, yelling or screaming are common forms of

discipline for one-year-olds; close to 300 million children between 2 and 4 experience psychological aggression and/or physical punishment by their caregivers at home; and 176 million children under five years of age witness domestic violence.

These figures are deeply distressing. But that is not the whole story... in fact, the story of violence in early childhood does not have a happy ending.

Early childhood stress - including exposure to violence - compromises children's health and education, with long-term negative mental and physiological consequences.

Violence can alter the developing brain's structure and function, with a detrimental impact on language acquisition and cognitive functioning. This, in turn, can lead to social and emotional competency deficits and an increased tendency to maladaptive behaviour.

As longitudinal studies show, children exposed to violence are more likely to: be victims of violence later in life and become perpetrators themselves; use violence as adults against domestic partners and their own children; and be at increased risk of engaging in violent and criminal behavior.

We must break this vicious and devastating cycle of violence - for the child, for the adult they become, and for society as a whole. Investing in early childhood is a human rights imperative. But in addition, it makes economic sense! Violence against children is estimated to cost the global economy over US\$7 trillion a year. Lack of investment in early years may hold children back even before they reach school age, paving the way to a life of disadvantage. Such a poor start in life can lead to a loss of about a quarter of average adult income per year. And countries may forfeit as much as two times their expenditure on GDP on health and education.

As underscored by our most recent report, violence prevention must start in early childhood! And by so doing, every child can develop to their full potential, free from fear and from violence.

As Nelson Mandela has once said, "the most difficult thing is not to change society... but to change oneself!" And evidence tells us something truly important: although corporal

punishment is widespread, the majority of parents convey one clear message: «we realize it is not necessary, but we simply do not know what else to do! »

This is why it is urgent to invest in positive parenting practices and in early childhood initiatives. This provides an important entry point to strengthen families' nurturing and protective role, to prevent child abandonment and placement in alternative care, and to support children at risk of violence.

Parenting skills programmes that go hand in hand with social protection interventions help to reduce the risk of social exclusion and deprivation, prevent family stress and tackle social norms that condone violent forms of child discipline.

Dear friends,

Violence is not a fate! And it can become a part of a distant past, if we invest in strong child protection systems and effective multidisciplinary action and cross sectoral cooperation.

One key dimension of this process is the enactment and enforcement of comprehensive legislation to prohibit all forms of violence against children, in all contexts.

With clear and explicit legislation, States express their accountability for children. But in addition, they convey a clear message of condemnation of corporal punishment, while encouraging positive discipline and the upbringing of children through non-violent means.

Legislation is key to ensure the protection of children's dignity and physical integrity at all times.

With strong legislation, state officials, professionals, families and common citizens have clear guidance about what is acceptable and what is non-negotiable. More importantly, child victims feel they matter! They can enjoy protection from neglect, abuse and exploitation, and can gain access to effective tools of redress and to genuine recovery and reintegration.

And let us not forget that law reform is also highly valuable when used in support of public information campaigns, social mobilization initiatives and the promotion of behavior change. When social conventions or harmful practices persist behind deeply entrenched traditions, legal reform can open avenues for engaging and mobilizing key actors and institutions,

including parliamentarians, religious leaders, local authorities, professional associations and families themselves to support efforts aiming at the abandonment of those practices.

Dear friends,

We must redouble our efforts to ensure that the promise of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is fulfilled, and that the vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is realized.

And there are exciting opportunities in the times ahead. 2019 marks the 30th anniversary of the CRC. And also in 2019, the UN General Assembly will host its first overall review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including SDG target 16.2 on ending all forms of violence against children. This is a unique milestone that we cannot miss!

Let us seize this historic opportunity to make a quantum leap in our important efforts. Together, we can build a world free from violence for all children, and we can secure a world of peace for all!

Thank you.