

Opinion/Editorial Article

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By Louise Arbour, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Violence against children

A veil of silence covers violence against children, yet abuses are so pervasive that no country can ignore them, and no society can claim to be immune from them. Despite almost universal acceptance of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Governments' concrete initiatives to counter such violence have been inadequate. Turning a blind eye to this phenomenon or claiming ignorance of its incidence and implications will now be very difficult. After more than three years of work, *World Report on Violence against Children*, a United Nations study, which will be released on October 11, provides a comprehensive account of the root causes and effects of the problem. In maintaining that such violence is never justifiable, it presents a range of measures that could prevent and curb abuses. The study also gathers existing statistics and data from a variety of sources and combines human rights, public health and child protection experiences and approaches to paint a global picture of this disturbing problem.

It documents that in 2002, 150 million girls and 73 million boys experienced forced sexual intercourse and other forms of sexual violence; between 100 and 140 million girls and women have undergone some form of female genital mutilation; of the 218 million of children who were working in 2004, 5.7 million were in forced or bonded labour in 2000; 1.8 million in prostitution and pornography; and 1.2 million were victims of trafficking. Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, the independent expert appointed by the UN Secretary-General to direct the study, concludes that children endure violence in silence and hopelessness because of shame and fear of retribution, and because such abuses are sometimes State-authorized and generally socially approved.

Failure to protect children starts with those who are directly responsible for their welfare and security in families, schools, and the communities where they live and work. Indeed, the study notes, "the majority of violent acts experienced by children is perpetrated by people who are part of their lives." But ultimately, the chain of responsibility ends with States which, under international human rights law, have an obligation to provide an environment in which children can fully enjoy their rights without fear of abuse and retribution.

The Convention of the Rights of the Child offers the most comprehensive legal framework to address violence against children. Its provisions protect them from physical and mental abuse, injury, neglect, maltreatment and exploitation, including sexual coercion. Along with other treaties, the Convention obliges Governments to act forcefully to ensure that anyone who has the care of a child, even for a short period, refrains from abusive conduct.

In their national law and practice, however, many States have carved out exceptions to the convention's provisions. Some governments are reluctant to interfere in the private sphere of family life and hold to account those who perpetrate violence within

the “sanctity” of the domestic perimeter. In many States, legislation addressing violence against children concentrates on sexual or physical violence, but ignores psychological violence and neglect. Other countries lack the security indispensable to effective protection, or the capacity and structures that give teeth to prevention measures and safeguard mechanisms. As a result, an untold number of children continue to suffer every day all over the world with scarce or non-existent options for recourse, while their tormentors are unscathed.

The imposition of the death penalty against minors is the most egregious example of State-enforced abuse. In some countries, less severe sentences may include flogging, stoning and amputation. Disciplinary measures that may amount to cruel, degrading, and unusual treatment or punishment are legal and applied in the penal institutions of at least 77 countries. All such practices are anathema to international human rights law.

Not surprisingly, girls, children with disabilities, or from minorities and other marginalized groups remain the most exposed to violence, both as targets of abuse and victims of State negligence to provide them with the necessary protection and justice.

In many countries, growing disparities in income, globalization, migration, and pandemics contribute to creating a climate of insecurity and strife which “often disproportionately” affects children’s rights, including economic, social and cultural rights.

Against this bleak background, the study laments a lack of knowledge and understanding of the root causes of violence against children. It points out that, even when States put in place policies to counter abuses, they often do so in ways and with means that are fragmentary and reactive rather than comprehensive and preventive. To tilt the balance towards effective protection, States should translate their commitments under international human rights law into policies and action, assess priorities, stop blaming or ignoring the victims and instead punish the perpetrators of violence and abuse.

To this effect, the UN study provides a wealth of recommendations, including on preventive measures and follow up mechanisms to ensure that children are not left unprotected. More than 3,000 individuals contributed to this study, including children who, shedding fear and shame came forward. They have offered thorough accounts of their predicament. We should pay heed to their words and needs. After all, it’s they who know best.

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