



OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON
VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Virtual Regional Dialogue on The Pacific

Statement by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence
against Children

Dr. Najat Maalla M'jid

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Dear participants, Ladies and Gentlemen

- I would like to start by thanking **the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues for the invitation to contribute to this multi-stakeholder regional dialogue**, in preparation of the 20th session of the Permanent Forum that will take place from 19-30 April 2021 on the theme of “Peace, justice and effective institutions: the role of indigenous peoples in the fulfillment of Sustainable Development Goal 16”.
- As the topics for both sessions today, **on violence against women and children and the next on incarceration are highly relevant for my mandate, I have included both topics in my introductory remarks.**
- Advocacy for accelerating implementation of Agenda 2030 and towards reaching the SDG targets on violence against children and its drivers is, while building back better after the pandemic, **a key strategic priority for my work.**
- In this work, the **situation of indigenous children is a cross cutting priority** in my strategy as well as in the working methods of the Office, ensuring that they are not left behind.
- My mandate joined the Inter-agency Support Group on Indigenous Issues in 2012. The situation of violence against indigenous women and girls was the focus of a report by my mandate in 2013, called “Breaking the silence on violence against indigenous girls, adolescents and young women.
- Last year I had a meeting with the Forum in order to revive the engagement of the mandate with the Forum, to strengthen cooperation and explore joint action. A follow up meeting on the working level was held where the possibility of developing a joint global report on the situation on violence against indigenous children was discussed. But I also intend to make the best use of strategic opportunities to highlight the particular situation of indigenous children.

Dear friends,

- **This meeting** is very timely as the world is facing **unprecedented global health, humanitarian and socio-economic crisis**.
- The pandemic and related lockdown measures have caused **a surge in domestic violence cases, women and children being main victims**.
- Unfortunately, **no place has been immune** from this “shadow pandemic”, **but even before the Covid-19 outbreak, home was not a safe place to live for so many children and women in the world**.
- The unprecedented global crisis due to the pandemic worsened already worrying situation for the most vulnerable children, including indigenous children who are already facing social discrimination and inequalities. **What began as a health crisis risks evolving into a broader child-rights crisis, in the words of the UN SG**.
- The impact of the pandemic and mitigation measures adopted in response have further increased the risk of **children experiencing or being exposed to violence, also undermining the progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals**.
- The pandemic and related lockdown measures have caused a surge **in domestic violence cases with women and children being main victims**.
- There is growing evidence that **intimate partner violence and child maltreatment co-occur within the same households**, therefore increase in calls to domestic violence helplines is another **indication that violence against children at homes is on the rise**.
- Yet, even the numbers do **not give a full global picture** and are likely to be an **underestimation of the magnitude of the problem** as reporting and monitoring systems are weak and challenges exist in data collection in many parts of the world.

- There are many reasons why victims of domestic violence are reluctant to report the crimes. **In the case of indigenous women, this is compounded by a fear of state structures, including police and social services. Indigenous women are discouraged from reporting domestic violence by fear of having their children removed and the threat of being left homeless.**
- **In addition, the mid and longer-term socio-economic crisis caused by COVID-19 will increase child poverty and the associated risk factors for violence. In less than a year, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the global economy, triggering the deepest global recession in decades, including estimates of up to 150 million people being pushed into extreme poverty by 2021, affecting mainly women and children .¹ We know that this will increase the risk of children experiencing violence and exploitation, with the most vulnerable children, including indigenous children, being hit hardest.**

Dear friends

- In my work as Special Representative I have been consistently drawing attention to the **need to recognize the links between violence against women and violence against children** as they share not only the **same causes** but also **consequences** across the lifespan and **coexist within the same households.**
- Violence against children and women within the family **is deeply rooted in gender discrimination** and low status of women and children in the society. Domestic violence is often **fueled by gender stereotypes and social norms that normalize and accept violence**, such as use of violent discipline against children.
- Moreover, **domestic violence generates intergeneration impact within the family.** Children who witness violence between parents may also be at greater risk of being violent or victims in their future relationships.

¹MSN. (2020). [World Bank chief warns extreme poverty could surge by 100 mn](#), August 20; World Bank (2020). [COVID-19 to Add as Many as 150 Million Extreme Poor by 2021](#), October 7th

- For these reasons, **preventing violence against children within the family is indispensable to long-term prevention of violence against women/intimate partner violence and vice versa.**

Dear friends,

- As a pediatrician, I am particularly concerned about the situation **of mental health of indigenous children and young people**, who face mental health inequalities, with high rates of suicide. Discrimination, poverty, unemployment, and marginalization substantially affect the mental health and wellbeing of indigenous young people.
- Moreover, **historical trauma experienced by indigenous peoples due to forced relocation, family removals, land dispossession, and loss of spiritual practices, language and culture is passed from generation to generation.**
- We know the **harm that violence and stress can cause to children’s physical and mental development at any stage of their lifecycle, be it in early childhood, infancy or during adolescence.**
- I recently issued a report called **Hidden Scars: How Violence Harms the Mental Health of Children**,² that highlights cost-effective, evidence-based interventions that can support Member States’ responses to the impact the pandemic has had on children’s mental health and well-being.
- It is my hope that this report will also be useful for strengthening the support to the mental health of indigenous children.

Dear friends,

²

United Nations publication, 2020.

- My mandate was created **by the UN Global Study on Violence against Children over ten years ago. The situation of indigenous children was a concern in the study, in particular their over-institutionalization.**
- The continuing **over-representation of indigenous children in care and justice system was confirmed in the UN Global Study of Children Deprived of Liberty that was launched in 2019.**
- The Study **quotes one example from northern Australia where the indigenous people make up 25 % of the total population but 94 % of children and young people in prisons are from the indigenous community.**
- The study lays out the many negative effects **that deprivation of liberty has on children's development, but it also points out that there are additional negative impacts on indigenous children.** When indigenous children are removed from their communities, it creates a sense of detachment and a cultural strain which is strongly detrimental for their mental health and reintegration back to their communities.
- The Study emphasises the importance that indigenous people can make use of their own traditional community-based responses. It cites an interesting example of the Villaga Fono Act in Samoa which permits village leaders to make use of traditional mediation in a majority of cases that involves children.
- My mandate is the Chair of the UN Task Force that supported the development of the report and now oversees the implementation of its recommendations, **paying attention to indigenous children.**
- Later in the year, my mandate is co-organizing **the World Congress on Justice for Children** that will take place in Mexico in November this year. We are planning to

dedicate **one session at this event to the situation of indigenous children and for this purpose we will prepare a discussion paper in cooperation with a wide range of partners that will look at the situations of over-incarceration of indigenous children as well as related issues such as family removals and mental health.**

Dear friends,

- This links with SGD 16 on just, inclusive and peaceful societies. **Goal 16 underpins all other SDG Goals:** without increased equal access to justice, security, inclusiveness and accountability, it will be impossible to create conditions for sustaining peace and development.
- These commitments cannot be fulfilled unless we can **ensure that all children have equal access to justice without discrimination, and that justice in all its forms (civil, penal, social) meets the rights and needs of children, as enshrined in international human rights standards.**
- That is why my mandate - in collaboration with a range of other partners - launched a **Call for Action on Justice for Children.** It is a Call for Action to fulfil our collective global commitment to ensure that all children have peaceful, just and inclusive lives.
- Justice for children **means that children's rights are protected, and their development supported. Justice for children means that children without discrimination have access to legal identity. Justice for children means that no child is discriminated, excluded or marginalized. Justice for children means that all children without discrimination have free and easy access to child sensitive justice and reporting mechanisms. Justice for children means that deprivation of liberty is only used as a matter of last resort, in exceptional circumstances and for the shortest possible period. Justice for children means that alternatives to detention and to**

institutionalization - for example restorative justice, rehabilitation and reintegration approaches - must be given greater priority.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- The theme for the SDG High Level Political Forum this year is **sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, i.e. building back better.**
- We must use the **development of building back better after the pandemic, as an opportunity** to reassess priorities to advance human development and reduce inequalities., especially for women and children.
- **We must ensure that child protection is recognized as a life-saving and essential service - along with health, mental health and education - as part of an intersectoral and child rights-based response to the pandemic response and recovery planning.**
- **This response should be built on a solid foundation of a permanent, inclusive social protection system, including universal child grants and universal health coverage, that will protect children and their caregivers from economic risks.**
- We must recognize that **allocating budgets and strengthening services** for the wellbeing and protection of children from all forms of violence is an **investment in the future** and will be key to the recovery phase as we build back.
- This cannot be done without **children's perspectives and views.**
- My mandate **joined the #COVIDUnder19 initiative**, a global survey that generated over 32,000 responses from children from 130 countries, including indigenous children on how COVID-19 affected their protection from violence, as well other areas of children's rights. **The top two areas of concern for the children were education and safety,**

which makes it imperative for the decision makers and governments to ensure safety for children in all settings.

- Children are part of the solution, so in everything we do for recovery, we must ensure **children are actively involved.**

Ladies and gentlemen,

- **Building back better cannot be just another mantra.** It must have a real, positive impact on people's lives, mainly the most vulnerable **including indigenous children and communities.**
- The pandemic has shown us once again **that inequality, discrimination and social disparities can have devastating consequences for children and women and vulnerable communities.**
- As we take stock of responses to the pandemic so far and look ahead to building back better afterwards, **we have the opportunity to re-assess our priorities.** We can choose to leave the inequalities and weaknesses in our social fabric as they were before the pandemic, or we can choose **to build societies that are more equal, more just, more peaceful and more inclusive.**
- If we fail to take this opportunity, **I fear we will not keep the promise of the 2030 Agenda to end violence against children, leaving no child behind.**
- It's an opportunity to seize for a strong mobilization of all key stakeholders, including indigenous children, at global, regional and national levels, **to END the pandemic of violence against all children.**
- I look forward to following the discussions today, respond to any questions and in particular to work together for indigenous children, and to ensure that no child is left behind as we work towards achieving the SDGs by 2030, while building back better.