



**United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary General on  
Violence against Children**

**Expert Consultation on Effective, Child Sensitive Counseling,  
Complaint and Reporting Mechanisms on  
Violence against Children**

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## **Introduction**

I am delighted to welcome you all to this important Expert Consultation on Effective and Child Sensitive Counseling, Complaint and Reporting Mechanisms, jointly organized with the OHCHR. It is a great pleasure to join hands with the OHCHR whose support and advice have been crucial for the preparation of the meeting.

I would like to thank the distinguished representatives from Governments, United Nations agencies, civil society organizations and other strategic partners for your presence and support. I very much look forward to your contributions to the debate. I also want to express my appreciation for the inputs made in the lead up to this meeting by national independent human rights institutions and by the NGO Advisory Council on Violence against Children.

A very special word of thanks goes to the excellent group of experts who are joining us today. Active at the international, regional, national or community levels; either in government, in independent child rights institutions, in civil society, in the judiciary or in international organizations, they bring a unique knowledge and experience that will decisively inform our reflections, and will help to identify significant developments we need to celebrate, prevailing challenges we need to urgently address, and strategic ways of moving forward.

## **Objectives**

As you know, the overall aim of this expert consultation is to strengthen child friendly counseling, complaint and reporting mechanisms for the safeguard of children's rights. The meeting is an important stage in the process of preparation of the thematic report requested by the Human Rights Council, in its March session, on Effective Child Sensitive Counseling, Complaint and Reporting Mechanisms on incidents of violence against children. This report is being jointly conducted by the Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography and I – I want to thank Najat Maalla for her strong leadership in this area.

The outcomes of today's expert consultation will be complemented by other critical contributions which have been sought from a wide range of actors, including Governments, United Nations agencies, human rights bodies and mechanisms, national human rights institutions and civil society organizations.

We are confident that this process will, first of all, help us gain an insightful picture of the wide and diverse spectrum of mechanisms and institutions which have been set in place to provide information, advice and assistance to children, and to receive, address and follow on reports of incidents of violence against children. These include mechanisms established as part of governments' accountability for child rights, both at the national and sub-national level, either within individual departments and in specific settings (such as schools and care institutions), or pursuing a multi disciplinary approach across departments and areas of work;

it further includes judicial remedies, mechanisms developed by civil society and community based organizations, including helplines; initiatives promoted by national independent institutions on children's rights; initiatives undertaken by child led organizations, etc.

Secondly, our reflections will help promote a better understanding of how widely available and accessible, genuinely safe, child friendly and protective these mechanisms are; how effective their action is to safeguard children's protection from violence, including by respecting children's rights to information, participation, privacy and protection from discrimination, stigmatization and reprisals; and how children can be adequately informed and supported to make use of those mechanisms and benefit from their action, at the local, national and also international levels.

Thirdly, I am confident that this process will help to clarify existing gaps and identify effective ways of addressing them. As mentioned by the Human Rights Council, the aim is to support States in their efforts to develop, at the national and community level, child sensitive counseling, complaint and reporting mechanisms that are confidential, age-appropriate, gender and disability sensitive, integral, safe, well-publicized and accessible to all children, for reporting and addressing incidents of violence.<sup>1</sup> But ultimately, the real indicator of progress lies on how children assess and are impacted by our action.

### **Safe, well publicized, confidential and accessible mechanisms for children, a key concern for the mandate of the SRSG on Violence against Children**

Over the past years, the promotion of safe, well publicized, confidential and accessible mechanisms for children has gained increasing relevance. This is certainly the result of the recognition of the right to accessible and effective remedies by core international human rights standards, and the significant jurisprudence of monitoring treaty bodies in this area – for instance, over its twenty years of work, the Committee on the Rights of the Child has devoted a high attention to this question, including in a number of its important General Comments.<sup>2</sup> Important political commitments have also been made to set in place such mechanisms as a matter of urgency – the agenda agreed upon at the Brazil World Congress against the Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents illustrates this well with its call upon States to establish, by 2013, an effective and accessible system for reporting, follow-up and support for child victims of sexual exploitation.

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<sup>1</sup> A/HRC/RES/13/20, operative paragraph 2 h)

<sup>2</sup> General Comments 2, 5 and 12 illustrate this well

Although high in the policy agenda, this is unfortunately an area where many challenges remain. This is why the UN Study on Violence against Children included, as one of its core recommendations, the establishment of safe, well publicized, confidential and accessible mechanisms for children, including telephone helplines through which children can report abuse, speak to a trained counselor in confidence and ask for support and advice; the consideration of other ways of reporting violence through new technologies; and the need to make all children, including those in care and justice institutions, aware of the existence of mechanisms of complaint.

This is a key area of concern for my mandate as SRSG on Violence against Children. Across regions, there is a lack of safe or trusted ways for children to report incidences of violence. Counseling, complaint and reporting services are frequently unavailable and, when they exist, they tend to lack the resources and skills to address children's concerns and promote children's healing and reintegration; moreover, children lack trust in them – fearing they will not be believed, and that they may endure further stigmatization, harassment, abandonment or reprisals. In most cases, children are unaware of the existence of such services, of where to go and whom to call to seek advice and assistance to overcome trauma and re-shape their lives; moreover, they feel deeply uncertain as to whether and how impunity can be fought.

Openly or implicitly, children feel pressed to conceal situations of violence, particularly when perpetrated by people they know and trust, either in schools and in care institutions or within the family circle. This explains the pervasive culture of silence, secrecy and social indifference around this phenomenon.

### **Children's concerns and commitment to act**

This is the pattern we see captured in existing research, but this is also what children consistently convey to me when I meet them in my missions – this was the case again earlier this month, when I met in Ghana, young people from 15 countries, gathered in a West African Youth Forum on Violence against Children.

Children report widespread violence, in all its forms, within schools, institutions, in the home and in the community at large; they acknowledge the high incidence of violence on the most vulnerable; they express concern at the weak levels of reporting, which they see as a result of persistent lack of information on what to do and where to go, with confidence and in confidence. They also recognize that, in addition to children, also teachers and parents feel powerless and unsupported by lack of services, assistance and advice.<sup>3</sup> And in addition, they complain about the dramatic absence of action when child victims, or someone on their behalf, dare to speak up and challenge violence, abuse or exploitation.

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<sup>3</sup> In a recent study conducted in Ghana on violence in schools, more than 87% of children surveyed indicated they did not have information on counseling and complaint systems in situations of violence; more than 60% of teachers and of 67% of parents also lacked that information

The picture is similar across regions. In a recent survey conducted amongst 15 to 18 years old from within the 27 EU countries, violence against children was identified as their most pressing concern, followed by sexual exploitation of children; 8 in 10 young people indicated that neither of them, nor anyone they knew, had sought help when they thought their rights had been violated; 80% did not know whom to contact or what to do in such circumstances. The large majority also recognized that the procedures were too complicated and lengthy for young people to be able to understand and use.<sup>4</sup>

Overall, children express fear and frustration at the persistence of these many challenges. But they also convey a unique resilience; and they recognize the opportunity for change, and their indispensable role in this process.

As a result, there is a growing number of child led initiatives for advocacy and information on children's protection from violence, and peer support to child victims. Through school and community debates, radio programmes, street drama, wall magazines and publications, through blogs and new social media, and also through community surveillance committees, they help to raise deeper awareness amongst children and their families about risks and concerns and generate greater openness to discuss and address them; and they promote better networking and collaboration between stakeholders, stronger confidence to report and social pressure for a speedy consideration of proceedings.

In spite of their many concerns, children convey a unique enthusiasm and determination to move forward. And they have high expectations on us all. They know that when commitment is strong and there is a shared sense of urgency, progress is within reach.

This is the spirit of our meeting. Children's perspectives and experience are a stronger reminder of what brings us here.

With the determination you all share and the sound expertise you represent, I am confident that at the end of our meeting we will not only feel reassured in our mission, but also re-energized to move faster in our endeavour.

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<sup>4</sup> European Commission, Flash Eurobarometer, 2009