VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

REGIONAL CONSULTATION
WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

United Nations Secretary-General's Study
on Violence against Children

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

This is one of a series of booklets reporting on the regional consultations organized to contribute to the United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children.

In preparation for the meetings, all the regions researched the situation in their region and prepared a compilation and analysis of concluding observations by the Committee on the Rights of the Child to country reports submitted by States Party to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Governments and others also provided information on programmes and projects designed to prevent violence against children, protect them and support those who had fallen victim to it. Governments additionally completed a questionnaire designed to elicit information on the legal frameworks in place to protect children from violence and sanction those responsible for it. Public submissions were sought and input from civil society organizations taken into account. Also, a number of countries held national consultations to prepare for the regional meeting and in many cases the national groups put in place mechanisms to continue efforts to combat violence against children as the Study process continues.

All this preparatory work allowed a clearer picture to be gained not only of what already exists in the areas of protection of children, prevention of violence and support to victims, but also where gaps and challenges remain.

In each region, the participants in the consultation – including children and young people themselves – developed an outcome document that in most cases was both a statement of intent and also a practical indication of actions that need to be taken. In some regions, countries also developed specific national action plans that they undertook to implement as a matter of priority.

The full reports of the consultations, the background materials prepared for the meetings including government's completed questionnaires, the statements of the children and young people and the outcome documents are available on the Study website: www.violencestudy.org.

This report contains highlights of the regional consultations and summarizes the background information prepared. Sources and references are to be found in the original materials.

The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the UN Study Secretariat or the regional consultation partners concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The West and Central Africa regional consultation

In West and Central Africa where, as in many other regions, people are often reluctant to discuss the relationships and contexts that tolerate and promote violence against children, breaking down the walls of silence is a vital first step to take. The 250 people who came together in Bamako, Mali, in May 2005, took that step and went further, openly discussing the many forms that violence against children takes in West and Central Africa, and formulating recommendations that will contribute to the United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children.

The participants came from 23 countries of the region and represented national governments, United Nations agencies, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media outlets, traditional and religious leaders and children and young people.

The 20 children from 15 countries met for four days before the consultation to prepare their contribution to the meeting. They included school children, out-of-school and working children. Their discussions centred on three areas that they considered to be of particular concern: corporal punishment at school and in the family;

sexual violence at school and in the family; violence in the workplace; and traditional practices, and they prepared a set of recommendations for consideration during the regional consultation:

Corporal punishment in the home:

- sensitize parents about the consequences of violence against children (media campaigns using fairy tales and proverbs);
- teach parents how to communicate with their children (parents' school); prioritize dialogue with children; train them on education without violence;
- offer alternative disciplining methods;
- inform parents about child rights and laws that ban corporal punishment;
- alleviate poverty and increase family benefits for children;
- parents must get to know their children better and reasons for their misbehaving;
- adopt and implement laws on violence against children.

Corporal punishment in the school:

- increase the number of education advisers and sensitize teachers about corporal punishment;
- create councils for discipline in schools that can work in partnership with children's organizations;
- establish and disseminate internal rules of conduct;
- sensitize education inspectors about corporal punishment;
- ensure children's security in schools;
- parents have to accompany younger children to school;
- offer alternative punitive measures.

Corporal punishment in the workplace, in the streets and in institutions:

- sensitize employers about child rights and consequences of corporal punishment to children;
- respect children;
- educate employers to listen to children;
- ensure children's safety at work; value alternative education methods;
- encourage and support the development of child-led organizations.

Sexual violence:

- get rid of taboos;
- sexual education for children;
- punish those who commit the acts and those who are quiet about them;
- create support centres for victims (free);
- set up free phone lines to break the silence;
- ensure children's safety;
- educate children about sexual violence;
- countries have to ratify and conform to laws protecting children;
- create preventative laws and disseminate information about them;
- create committees for eliminating violence against children, particularly sexual violence;
- find healthy ways for children to spend their free time;
- limit video clubs.

Traditional and cultural practices:

- forbid harmful traditional practices by law;
- launch awareness campaigns for the community;
- create local committees for child protection.

> ***Breaking the silence does not mean merely compiling shocking stories, but requires continuous efforts to understand the root causes of violence, the factors that allow it to occur frequently and, most importantly, effective ways to adequately prevent and respond to this violence, where it occurs***

Forty-eight journalists also met in advance of the consultation to consider the role of the media in combating violence against children. Their participation reflects both the willingness and the necessity of mobilizing journalists, working with them to improve understanding of the issues, and provoking national and international debate on the question of child protection. The journalists heard from Professor Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, the Independent Expert appointed by the United Nations Secretary-General to prepare the Study on Violence against children. Professor Pinheiro stressed that breaking the silence does not mean merely compiling shocking stories, but requires continuous efforts to understand the root causes of violence, the factors that allow it to occur frequently and, most importantly, effective ways to adequately prevent and respond to this violence, where it occurs. He reminded the journalists that children are not ‘mini-citizens’ with ‘mini-human rights’ but whole citizens with a right to be heard.

Traditional chiefs and religious leaders present recalled the important place of religion in African societies. They emphasized that in the different religions children – both girls and boys – are considered ‘treasures’ to be cherished and protected. They called for more awareness raising among religious and traditional chiefs on the rights of the child and the importance of recognizing that children have both rights and duties towards adults.

These preparatory meetings, as well as a series of national consultations, laid the groundwork for the regional consultation and, by the time it began, many different groups had been mobilized. Professor Pinheiro reminded participants of the importance of this broad mobilization, not only in West and Central Africa but across the world, and of the difficulty in achieving this around such a sensitive and emotional issue. The preparation of a truly global picture, he said, requires the support and active participation of a vast number of networks, especially those working in the field, directly with children, and children themselves.

Professor Pinheiro also explained that the final Study report would be organized around five ‘settings’ where children encounter violence or are at risk of facing it: the home, school, other institutions, the community and the workplace. Because of the groundbreaking work accomplished through the Graça Machel Report on children and armed conflict, he explained, that area would not be singled out in the Study on Violence against Children. Of course, the issue would appear from time to time under other headings as the links between conflict and other forms of violence are discussed.

In all countries of the world it is difficult to discuss the sensitive and emotional issues of violence against children. The preparation of a truly global picture and which seeks to propose effective and clear recommendations requires the support and active participation of a vast number of networks, especially those working in the field, directly with children, and children themselves.

Violence against children in West and Central Africa

Many forms of violence against children are linked to specific economic, social and cultural contexts. It rarely occurs as an isolated event but is more likely a result of a combination of factors that increase the vulnerability of children and trigger behaviour that results in others preying on this vulnerability in a number of ways, including through violent acts. In West and Central Africa, many countries face the challenges of poverty, increasing urbanization, disease and conflict, and these increase children's vulnerability and deviant social behaviours.

The meeting heard that some cultural traditions also contribute to violence against children. All these factors act as catalysts for violence against children, as do the significant gender disparities across the region, which allow hierarchies of power that put women and girls at particular risk in many circumstances. Some cultural, traditional and religious practices also foster power dynamics that can result in violence being inflicted on those who are seen as weaker or subservient.

The move to the city is one of the most significant socio-economic changes to have taken place in most West African countries in the last three decades. It has brought with it a number of problems that affect the state's, the community's and the family's ability to protect children. Social services cannot keep up with the pressures of population growth; shantytowns and temporary housing areas have sprung up and exist on the margins of serviced communities; and family and community support networks have been eroded.

Of the 24 countries that make up the region, 16 rank among the world's least developed countries and 21 among low-income countries. Half the population of the region lives below the poverty line. Although it is not in itself a determinant of violence against children, poverty invariably creates a context in which children's vulnerability to exploitation, abuse and violence is increased. In the face of poverty – long-term or temporary – families may send their children into work at an early age, in order to survive. They may marry off girls very young in order to pass on the costs of raising them and sometimes to receive payment in the form of a dowry. As a result of these and other exploitative practices, children drop out of school or do not enrol at all, and this puts them at even greater risk of exploitation and abuse,

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not only in the short term but in the longer term too. In the year 2000, with a gross school enrolment rate of 81.2 per cent, sub-Saharan countries recorded the lowest regional average in the world – and of the 115 million out-of-school age children worldwide, 42 million, some 36 per cent, live in sub-Saharan Africa.

Violence against children is also found, however, in the most important place for children to feel safe and protected: the family. In West and Central Africa it is still considered very positive to have many descendants, and children are seen as a blessing for the family ancestry, a factor of positive recognition for the mother, of material wealth and insurance for the parents' old age. Children have a central place in the African family.

And yet, violence against children by family members and others in the family circle is frequent and takes many forms. Throughout the region, violence in the family is largely hidden and many forms are not considered to be violence at all.

In the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, the Gambia, Mali, Nigeria and Senegal, for example, the right of parents or others in charge of a child to 'give that child a beating' is openly acknowledged. Few countries in the region have clear laws governing corporal punishment in the family; generally, the approach taken to such acts is that it is acceptable to punish children 'with proper judgement'. This concept of 'reasonable corporal punishment' is difficult to define or police – it is largely subjective and results in physical and psychological harm.

Similarly, although there are laws punishing parents for violence against their children in the form of abuse or neglect, in many countries these are not specifically defined. For example, participants at the consultation discussed the concept of 'neglect' as a form of indirect violence – denying a child food as a form of punishment, for example, may not ***per se*** be violent but has a damaging psychological and potentially physical impact.

There is little data on the scope and nature of sexual abuse of children in the family in West and Central Africa, although it is known to occur. Violence against children, whatever form it takes, seriously damages their physical and psychological health in ways that can and do result in injury or death. In Africa the homicide rate is one of the highest for children under the age of five (17.9 per 100,000 among boys and 12.7 per 100,000 for girls).

Sexual violence is more easily documented when it occurs outside the home, in the broader community. This is generally dealt with under the heading of 'commercial sexual exploitation of children', and includes not only the prostitution of children but also the trafficking of children into the sex trade. Child trafficking within and from the region has become an issue of wide concern, and takes place not only for commercial sexual exploitation but also for labour exploitation more generally. Trafficking into labour exploitation includes a corrupted development of the long-established tradition of 'placing' children with extended family members or others who offer to 'take in' the child either to relieve the burden on the child's family or as a transaction involving paying for the child's services as a domestic helper. Girls who find themselves in exploitative domestic labour are known to run away and, as a consequence, find themselves on the streets and at risk of commercial sexual exploitation. The links between child prostitution, trafficking and labour exploitation are evident.

Like violence in the family, violence against children in domestic labour is hidden from public view. Such violence can take many forms. It can include direct physical violence against a child, including sexual violence, and psychological violence in the form of humiliation, severe scolding or attacks on a child's dignity. It also includes, however, the abuse and exploitation that effectively constitute forced labour, for example long working hours, extreme and hazardous conditions, isolation and confinement.

Children are exploited in labour in other ways too. They are taken out of school and put to work at a young age and are at high risk of violence of many kinds. Intervening against child labour is made more challenging because so few children in the region are registered at birth and many children cannot prove their age.

Children who do have the chance to go to school are also, however, at risk of violence, including violence from other children, from teachers and from other school staff. Very little research has been carried out in this area but we do know that, throughout West and Central Africa, the teacher is 'identified by the stick'. Inside the classroom, the teacher is in sole command and free to decide how he will impose discipline. It has been pointed out that each new school year, a child has to learn a whole new regime of discipline, regulations and punishments, not of the school but of the individual teacher. Participants at the consultation heard that children who do not learn these rules quickly, or who flout them, are beaten, shouted at and sometimes more severely punished.

Pupils are expected to be passive and remain silent. The teacher dominates and directs, and children who chatter or make noise are punished. Beyond the use of violence as 'discipline', however, there are also reports of sexual harassment of girl pupils by teachers at secondary school level in particular, in both rural and urban schools, often in exchange for better grades or a 'reward'.

Physical and psychological violence are inflicted on children not only in government schools but also in Koranic schools, which are not integrated into the school system and are not subject to monitoring or inspection. In these schools, too, the teacher sets the rules, including those relating to punishment, and violence in the guise of 'discipline' or 'education' is common. An Islamic scholar told the meeting that violence against children is incompatible with the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad but that discipline is not considered 'violence' and that there is an urgent need to get the message across to teachers in all schools, including Koranic schools, that corporal punishment and verbal abuse are damaging to children and should not be permitted. It is clear that a consensus needs to be reached on acceptable forms of discipline across the school and broader education sector, emphasizing the fact that violence of any kind is unacceptable.

Most children living on the streets end up joining gangs – these are in a way a substitute family for the child but the rules of life in the gangs can be destructive.

When family and school life become intolerable, children may seek escape to a life on the streets. Some children live on the streets, and many more throughout the region live at home but earn money working on the streets, hawking or running errands. Most 'street children' end up joining gangs; in a way these take the place of their family, but the rules of life in the gangs can be destructive. Older members of the gang impose their will through violence against younger children. They use the children for petty crime that puts them at risk and often sell them drugs to keep them under control. Drugs also take the edge off the children's hunger, lessen the pain of any injuries, take away the shame and give them the courage to laugh and relax with their mates.

On the streets, too, children are prey to adults looking for sex and police who raid and destroy the places where the children sleep, handle them roughly and may arrest them. Once in police custody, the children are at risk of violence both from the authorities and also from others in detention.

The culture of violence is particularly strong in societies that have emerged from or are still in the grip of conflict. In recent years there have been outbreaks of armed conflict, mainly internal, in a number of countries in West and Central Africa: Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Central African Republic, Guinea Bissau and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Although there is a wealth of literature on violence against children and women in situations of conflict, there is almost no research on the impact of such conflict on traditional support mechanisms and family structure. Although the regional consultation did not consider the direct impact of conflict on children specifically, it recognized that the impact of conflict on family life and social structures is a major factor in increasing the incidence and the risk of violence against children in other settings, and that more in-depth study on this is needed.

For example, although much has been written on the systematic use of rape as a weapon of war, little attention has been paid to what this means to the woman's place in the family after conflict has ended. Women who have dared to come forward testify to the rejection they suffer from husband, family and community. Young women face enormous difficulties finding a husband when the community knows they have been raped. They say they are socially 'non-existent'. Children born of rape are often neglected or treated violently because they are seen to personify past trauma.

Conflict also leaves behind destroyed schools, social and health facilities, a malfunctioning production system and widespread poverty, and all of these have an impact on social norms. They contribute to social conditions in which violence is more readily resorted to and children and indeed adults are at greater risk of falling victim to it.

In this region, too, large numbers of children are affected by the scourge of HIV/AIDS. Many children have been orphaned by the pandemic and may end up on the streets or in institutions. They may be sent to live with family members or others who put them to work in order to make ends meet. Older children may have to take on the role of head of the household and care for younger siblings. In some families children may have to care for a sick parent. Some children are themselves HIV-positive and have little chance of appropriate treatment. In all these situations, children are at extreme risk of discrimination, stigmatization, exploitation and indeed of direct violence. They are often excluded from the community, from school and from any available services. They have no income and no-one to protect them. Some may turn to prostitution or delinquency.

In addition to these 'modern' challenges, communities in West and Central Africa are also characterized by traditional practices and customs that can, in some cases, both harm children and put them at risk of harm.

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Female genital cutting (in some regions also called female genital mutilation, or FGM) infringes on the physical integrity of a young girl's body and has serious effects on her physical and mental health. Throughout the region girls are exposed to this practice before adulthood but increasingly at a very young age, often before they are four years old. Although there have been efforts to ban this practice, it persists. In Guinea, Mali and Mauritania, for example, recent surveys show that between 71 and 99 per cent of girls undergo FGM.

There are other long-held traditions that have serious implications for children's well-being: in Benin, Gabon, Nigeria, Liberia, Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, people believe in 'child sorcerers'. These children are considered to have evil powers, and to bear a 'negative charge' from birth. They are often held responsible for any misfortunes that befall the community, may be driven out from their families, marginalized by society or placed in rehabilitation centres. They are abused, tortured and sometimes killed. There are other traditions that put children at risk in this region. It is the sad truth that throughout the region, as in other regions, children are seen as so 'low down' in the social hierarchy that adults may use and abuse them as they see fit and then establish this abuse as 'traditional'.

What is being done to stop violence against children?

All the countries of West and Central Africa have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the over-arching international agreement that children have rights, including the right to a life free of violence, abuse and exploitation.

They have all taken some steps, in accordance with the CRC, to bring national laws into line with the provisions of the convention. However, the enforcement of these laws remains seriously inadequate and there is a huge gap between the intent as embodied in the law and the reality of children's daily lives.

One problem is that in this region national laws often co-exist with customary or religious laws. Most frequently the law gives authority to customary law in certain areas and even codifies customary practices in some instances (for example in laws relating to succession) even if they are contrary to international norms.

There is a real need for a recognized framework based on human rights in all countries of the region that acknowledges the rights and responsibilities of all sectors of society and encourages the protection of children as an overriding objective.

Governments, international agencies and national NGOs have been active in a number of areas of child protection in recent years, but what is needed is a massive turn-around in the mindset of people in the region who tolerate violence against children as part and parcel of everyday life. The walls of silence must be broken down.

Violence in the home and family

In West and Central Africa, the structure and size of families vary. They range from the extended family made up of all marital units, to the nuclear western-style family, to polygamous family groups and families with strong 'kinship' links, to the 'extended elementary family' in towns, made up of nuclear families combined with other individuals or other related nuclear families integrated into a social and spatial 'residential system'. In this close grouping, people depend on each other for help and work together according to their strengths.

The family concession, whether country courtyard or city square, is often characterized by crowding, intermingling of relations and financial difficulties, and may constitute another 'social setting' where violence is expressed, sometimes latent, sometimes explicit. It is conversely also a play zone and can be an area of solidarity, comfort and protection for children.

Whatever the family structure, violence in the form of corporal and psychological punishment in the guise of 'discipline' is common. The hierarchical structure of the family means that children occupy different 'rungs' in the hierarchy, depending on their age and gender, and so experience varying degrees of vulnerability to such violence. Handicapped children often live in the most difficult conditions. They are seen as a heavy burden on their parents or even a curse. They consequently suffer discreet or indeed open neglect and violence that is accepted and sometimes encouraged by the family and community they live in. Children's vulnerability to violence and the likelihood of it occurring within the family context is influenced also by the cultural, economic, social, geographical and political context in which the family functions.

Corporal punishment, however, is largely a function of a system of values passed on within a community and adopted within a family. It reflects accepted norms for bringing up children, regardless of the family's financial status. For example, in the Wolof language, the word 'yar' means both 'educate' and 'whip'. In a survey of 2,070 households in Togo, children aged 10 to 17 were asked about violence inflicted on them. Of 1,613 children interviewed, only 5 per cent said they had been never been beaten.

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The use of corporal punishment and the very nature of childhood, however, differ not only from society to society but also between different groups within a society. For example, among the Hausa-speaking populations of northern Nigeria, the non-Muslim Maguzawa reject the notion of beating a child, whereas the Muslim Hausa tolerate it both in the family and in schools. This difference in approach to corporal punishment is not a function of the religions of the two groups (since, as noted above, violence against children is considered incompatible with the teachings of Islam). Rather it is an example of how each community may reflect a number of different approaches to the adult/child relationship, for whatever reason. This need to look at detail and avoid generalizations is important if appropriate actions to reduce violence are to be planned.

Children may also be at risk of sexual violence within the family circle, and girls are particularly at risk. Although incest is not new in Africa, it is only recently that it has been recognized and become public. It remains surrounded by taboo and shamed silence. A study in Benin in 2000 nevertheless showed that almost 32 per cent of children interviewed had experienced sexual aggression within the family. Male and female cousins were involved in 47.7 per cent of the acts, uncles and aunts 43 per cent, fathers and brothers 2.4 per cent, tutors 2.3 per cent and stepparents 4.6 per cent. In Cameroon, records of sexual abuse cases show that most abuse was perpetrated by relatives or friends: uncles, in-laws and family friends. In 20 per cent of the cases, the father was the perpetrator. Those who sexually abuse children use physical force and then psychological pressure afterwards to stop the victim from talking about it.

Throughout West and Central Africa, sexual violence within the family is universally condemned but universally hidden. Cases of incest are rarely brought to justice. Shame and dishonour fall on the victim, not the perpetrator, and are a major reason why children do not speak out when they are abused. The severe condemnation of sexual violence also partly explains why witnesses do not come forward, for fear of bringing stigma and rejection to the family.

Specific to this region is the practice of incest for mystical reasons. In some well-off milieus, fetishists convince the fathers that they must have sexual relations with their daughters in order to maintain high-level positions or obtain material prosperity.

Cultural practices also contribute to psychological violence against children, which are not seen to share the same space as adults. The African child's upbringing often takes place within the framework of a relationship of fear. Children cannot go against what adults say nor indeed look them in the face. This hierarchy based on age and sex is unanimously acknowledged and respected in Africa, and can be a source of psychological violence and frustration for the child. Children are also expected to contribute financially to the well-being of their elders and, when they cannot give gifts or make contributions to family ceremonies, they may be scolded for not honouring their 'debt' to their elders or lacking gratitude. This may result in emotional harm to the child or, for example, motivation to leave school and begin working to earn money. Children from polygamous marriages suffer special trauma caused by the many relationships at play.

Psychological trauma is particularly difficult to deal with because it may not manifest itself until years after the root cause. It also varies considerably with each child.

Violence in schools

The phenomenon of violence in schools is not specific to West and Central Africa; all over the world, children are confronted with violence in places where they should be protected and nurtured. The use of corporal punishment in African schools is pervasive and affects both boys and girls. Although girls are particularly vulnerable to the sexual intentions of their teachers and male pupils, boys are not necessarily spared from sexual violence at school.

In addition to the physical and psychological repercussions of such violence, the fear of violence persuades many children not to risk going to school at all. Although most governments in the region have enacted laws to ban corporal punishment in schools, the legislation is not adequately enforced. As a result, children surveyed on punishment meted out at school all, without exception, reported that they had at least once in their life been witness to physical violence against a classmate or victim of violence themselves. Clearly one of the lessons that children learn at school is that violence is a legitimate tool with which to impose authority.

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Sexual violence is also used as a demonstration of power in schools, and girls may suffer at the hands of their teachers or other students. Studies suggest that sexual harassment by teachers of girls in their class is extensive at secondary school level and in the higher classes at primary level in both rural and urban schools. Often this takes the form of ‘blackmail’ against a threat of bad grades or failure. Throughout the region, ministries of education acknowledge this problem and consider it to be a major cause of dropout for girls.

Sexual violence against girls persists when they go on to higher studies. Eighty per cent of university students surveyed in the Democratic Republic of Congo recognized sexual abuse by teachers and other students as problem. Additionally, gang rape is also used in schools, with boys ‘teaching girls a lesson’ through sexual violence. Girls who resist may be beaten.

Muslim parents in West and Central Africa consider it their duty to give their children a religious education and entrust them to a 'marabou' whose responsibility it is to teach them the Koran. As communities have grown poorer, some teachers abuse this responsibility and exploit their charges, mostly boys between the ages of five and 15, by sending them to beg in the city, ostensibly in order to teach them humility. On the streets, the children are vulnerable to abuse and violence, including sexual abuse. If a child does not return with the amount of money fixed by the marabou, or is seen as disobedient, he is subjected to harsh corporal punishment. The under-resourcing of Koranic schools, which are often excluded from funding and programmes available to the school system more generally, has been recognized as a challenge that needs to be tackled. There are some reports that children may also be sent to other countries for the purposes of begging – for example children begging on the streets of Dakar have been found to come from Mali and Guinea -- and this amounts to child trafficking.

Violence in institutions

When children come into conflict with the law, they enter another realm where they are vulnerable to violence and abuse. A 2004 report on state violence in Benin indicated that children in conflict with the law meet with lashings from the police in the guise of punishment or to encourage them to confess. Violence against children is widespread in police stations. There is little research on children in conflict with the law in other countries in the region, but it is likely that children all over the region suffer the same fate.

Most children who come into conflict with the law do not have the support of a child-friendly lawyer or trained social worker. They are generally children who have broken away from society, school and family and found themselves on the streets obliged to find a way to survive. Often the children who find themselves in custody have done nothing wrong but have been rounded up during a police raid. Those who have erred have often committed only minor offences.

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For these young children, prison is not a door to rehabilitation and rebuilding but a traumatic experience. They are often crowded into prisons alongside adults who abuse them. Conditions are generally poor and violence is frequent. The children do not get enough to eat and live in unhygienic conditions. Even when only in remand awaiting further action, they may be mixed with habitual offenders and adult criminals. Because many children taken into custody have no identity papers, the police may just guess their age and treat them as adults. Very few countries in the region, in any case, have alternative facilities for minors and even those that do say they lack resources to staff them and train personnel.

Violence against children in the community

Each community in West and Central Africa has its own practices and customs. Some of them result in violence against children, linked to traditions or collective behaviour. Such violence is seen as legitimate because it is grounded in respect for tradition and culture and is so closely tied in to social rituals developed by the group. In general there is no specific intention to harm the child but rather to socialize them into the community. This is the case of FGM, a 'ritual' form of violence against girls in particular.

In most countries of the region, there has been outright refusal to ban female genital cutting on the basis that is a 'matter of cultural values'. But the truth is that the main reason why girls are subjected to this horrendous and life-threatening practice is socio-cultural: it is a way for men to exercise control.

Girls are subjected to cutting before they reach adulthood but even before the age of four. Their clitoris is removed and the labia minora or majora are cut. This is a dangerous and irreversible procedure and, in addition to the immediate dangers of severe bleeding and physical and psychological disfigurement, can have long-term repercussions on a girl's health, her ability to give birth and her education. Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, the Central African Republic and Côte d'Ivoire are all affected by female genital cutting, with rates ranging from 45 per cent to 99 per cent of all girls. Chad is also affected but no data are available for this country. In Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, the Central African Republic and Benin, there has been a moderate decrease in the practice from one generation to the next. There has been a significant decrease in Nigeria (48 per cent of women between 45 and 49 compared to 9 per cent of girls from 15 to 19).

Some countries – Ghana, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Chad and Niger – have set up legal measures to ban FGM and have conducted campaigns to explain and persuade people to abandon the practice. In most countries of the region, however, there has been outright refusal to ban female genital cutting on the basis that is a 'matter of cultural values'.

The main reason why girls are subjected to this horrendous and life-threatening practice, however, is socio-cultural: it is a way for men to exercise control. It is seen as guaranteeing virginity before marriage, faithfulness and submission to the husband because excised women have lower sexual sensitivity. But men alone are not responsible for the continuation of female genital cutting: society as a whole condones and indeed promotes it. People who speak against it fear exclusion. This is one reason why FGM has increasingly been 'medicalized' – the argument is that making the procedure safer is a way to allow it to continue without harm to the child. This completely ignores, however, the hierarchical intentions of the practice and the right of the child – and the woman she becomes – to physical integrity.

Girls are also particularly affected by the tradition of early marriage in the region, although it does affect both girls and boys. This is a serious threat to the well-being of children. Some 49 per cent of girls in West Africa and 40 per cent in Central Africa are married between the ages of 15 and 19. The situation varies from one country to another: in Niger, for example, 71 per cent of all girls below the age of 18 are already married, compared to 4 per cent in Cap Verde. In Burkina Faso, a girl can be married by the age of 12. Not all marriages are registered though, so a complete picture of the phenomenon is difficult to draw.

One common reason for marrying off children at a young age is to 'protect' daughters, in particular, from premarital sexual activity and pregnancy, so preserving their virginity. This is justified on moral, cultural and religious grounds. The girls generally are not in a position to object to being married off, other than by running away from the family.

In some cases, early marriage is used as an economic survival strategy for the family. Poor families see marrying off a daughter as a way of either reducing the 'burden' on the family or indeed 'earning' money or kind in the form of dowry. To this extent it could be said to represent a commercial transaction and can be classified as commercial exploitation.

Young brides may be condemned to a life of domestic servitude and are expected to produce children quickly. Early pregnancy can have serious consequences: adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19 are twice as likely to die in childbirth than women over 20.

Young brides may be condemned to a life of domestic servitude and are expected to produce children quickly. Early pregnancy can have serious consequences: adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19 are twice as likely to die in childbirth than women over 20. The risk is five times as high for girls under the age of 15. Thousands of girls suffer from obstetric fistula which is a condition linked to pregnancy and which causes chronic incontinence. Children born to them are very likely to die. Generally speaking, the risk of death is much higher for newborn babies and infants born to adolescent mothers, so that the violence of early pregnancy crosses generations.

Girls who marry young are also more vulnerable to physical violence and exploitation throughout their life. Often they are removed from school to marry and so become even more dependent on others for their livelihood. They are unable to flee abusive marriages because they have no way of securing a living and cannot return to the family that married them off in the first place. It is not uncommon for girls in this situation to turn to prostitution to survive.

The custom of early marriage drives families in Mauritania, Niger and northern Mali to stuff their five to 10 year-old girls with food, or feed them particular types of food, so that they develop more quickly and become as plump as a mature woman. This overfeeding, at a crucial time in their development, is believed to make them more attractive to men. They are forced to gulp down large quantities of food under the intimidation of family members and, in addition to this traumatic experience, run the risk of serious health problems: heart disease, hypertension and diabetes.

One factor making actions against early marriage more difficult is the low rates of birth registration in the region. In 2004, only one child in three was registered at birth in West and Central Africa, for a variety of reasons: hurdles facing families include immigrant or refugee status, lack of resources in registry offices, and the difficulty of the system.

Some traditions single out children who are seen as a threat to the community, and in such cases there may be intentional harm. This is the case of children who are considered 'sorcerers', and it is the case of children marginalized by HIV/AIDS.

The phenomenon known as 'child sorcerers' exists in various forms, especially in Benin, Gabon, Nigeria, Liberia, Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These children are considered to have evil powers and are often held responsible for the community's misfortunes. They are driven out from their families, marginalized or put in rehabilitation centres. They are victims of abuse, torture and even killings.

In Benin, for example, breach birth, malformation or the first tooth coming through in the upper jaw can be fatal for a child. The baby – seen to have magical powers that can threaten the family and community – may be torn from his mother's arms and put to death or abandoned in a remote place. Family members will participate in the ritual killing of such children by a traditional dignitary and may even pay the executioner. Mothers have very little say in the matter; the family and executioner are considered to be acting 'to restore social order'.

Where a community is characterized by illiteracy and poor monitoring of pregnant women, and where there is a high number of deliveries not attended by qualified medical personnel, the risk that the child will be subject to 'checking' by traditional birth attendants who can pronounce his fate are high. In some villages in Benin, 'recyclers' receive children labelled 'sorcerers' to exorcize the evil they are supposed to harbour and reintegrate them into the community. Such children are regularly subjected to serious and multiple violence.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, there has been an enormous increase in accusations of sorcery against children in the past few years. This is a result not only of superstition but also of poverty made worse by the war in the east of the country and the lack of a specific policy for child protection. Children are accused of having the 'evil eye' and are driven out from their families and ostracized by the community. In June 2001, five and six year-old children were slaughtered as 'sorcerers' and a 14 year-old adolescent rumoured to have cast a spell on a woman was tortured to death. Thousands of children between the ages of four and 18 are accused of being the cause of misfortune and accidents, illness and death. Once sorcery is confirmed by the church, these children are more often than not beaten and thrown out by the family. They are abandoned to the streets where they are treated as objects of fear.

Other superstitions and customs put children at risk. In Ghana, Togo and Nigeria, for example, young girls below the age of puberty are given to local fetish shrines in retribution for an offence committed by a male member of the family. The girl becomes the property of the fetish leader who abuses her both sexually and economically, treating her as a servant. Although this so-called '***trokosi'*** system is banned by law, it is estimated that thousands of young girls are in fact victim to it.

The children of the HIV/AIDS pandemic are cast out from society and looked upon with fear and lack of compassion.

The children of the HIV/AIDS pandemic are similarly cast out from society and looked upon with fear and lack of compassion. Millions of children have lost one or both parents to HIV/AIDS. In 2003, the total number of so-called 'AIDS orphans' in 18 countries of the region was estimated at more than four million. Nigeria alone has some 1,800,000 AIDS orphans. More than 10 countries saw an increase of 100 per cent in the number of orphans between 1999 and 2004. The number of families affected by HIV/AIDS is set to rise over the next decade.

In addition to the orphans, children are affected in other ways by HIV/AIDS. They may have to leave school to care for a sick family member. They may live in poor households that have taken in AIDS orphans. They may be HIV-positive themselves. Many of them face increased violence; all of them are more vulnerable to violence because of their precarious situation. They suffer psychological stress, stigmatization, discrimination and exclusion. They are deprived of schooling, have little access to healthcare, suffer difficult living conditions and must often take on adult responsibilities with no means to provide for themselves and their family. They are at high risk of exploitation, of turning to prostitution or delinquency, and are looked upon by their community as somehow at fault.

There is anecdotal evidence that very young children are increasingly at risk of rape by adults who believe that sexual contact with a virgin child can cure HIV/AIDS.

All these customs, superstitions and traditional practices exist in a region where years of armed conflict have engendered a culture of violence that affects all people but children especially. Children are deprived of protection and support as conflict leaves in its wake dysfunctional families and destroyed services. Group and inter-personal relationships are reconstructed on the basis of mistrust and fear.

Women who have given birth after being raped by combatants from all sides are rejected by family and community and forced to raise their children alone or put them on the streets. Young children recruited into armed conflict find themselves in post-conflict societies where there are no jobs, no programmes to help them rebuild their lives and no hope for the future. Many of them move to other countries to fight in wars that provide the only way of life they know. Young combatants from Liberia are reported to be going to Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea, where there is growing political instability.

Children displaced by war and living in refugee camps are confronted with daily violence. Family violence is more likely in such difficult living conditions; hierarchies within the camps use violence to impose their power; unaccompanied children are abused and mistreated. The almost total impunity for criminals encourages the spiralling of violence and delinquency in post-conflict societies desensitized to violence. Children are invariably the first victims.

Violence against children in workplaces

Over the past two decades more and more children in West and Central Africa have entered the world of work prematurely. This is largely a result of pressures to contribute to the family income but also because the education system has been unable to retain children for a number of reasons. The International Labour Organization, ILO, reports that 48 million children between the ages of five and 14 are economically active in the region – almost 30 per cent of the total child population. Most of the countries of the region have set the minimum legal age for entering work at between 13 and 15, however low birth registration rates make this difficult to check.

Most of the children in labour in this region work within the framework of their own family, doing informal tasks or domestic chores. They may work alongside other family members in agriculture or, in urban areas, in small production units, catering, services or as street hawkers. In these cases they are often classified as 'apprentices'. Many girls, especially, may be in child domestic labour, seen by many families as good preparation for adult life as a wife and mother.

All forms of child labour are exploitative and put children at risk of physical and psychological violence inflicted by employers, co-workers and those who stand to profit from economic exploitation of the child.

In recent times there have been worrying reports of children moving into some of the worst forms of child labour: stone breaking and mining, waste collection, begging and prostitution. In all of these activities, there are extreme hazards. Some people therefore argue that child labour, particularly the worst forms of child labour, constitutes ***de facto*** a form of violence. It is certainly true that all forms of child labour are exploitative and that they put children at risk of physical and psychological violence inflicted by employers, co-workers and those who stand to profit from economic exploitation of the child.

The worst forms of child labour carry specific risks for children. In West and Central Africa, for example, children are trafficked for labour, including into sexual exploitation. Many girls are trafficked into child domestic labour, and boys may end up on building sites. One characteristic of child trafficking in this region is that it is often an extension and perversion of the long-established ‘placing’ of children with families that are supposed to care for them when their own family is unable to. Once upon a time such placement gave children from poor families the chance to grow up with extended family members who were better able to look after them and provide for them. Increasingly these once benign surrogate families take on a child to exploit, putting him or her to work and profiting from the child’s labour.

Children are trafficked in, to, from and through Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Togo. There are recent reports that child trafficking is spreading to new economically attractive centres such as Equatorial Guinea.

Girls who end up in domestic labour are very vulnerable to violence because they are effectively hidden behind the doors of a private home, traditionally a ‘no-go’ area for police, social workers and labour inspectors. In addition to being exploited – underpaid or not paid at all, forced to work long hours including at night, given hard and hazardous tasks – children in domestic labour are badly fed, shouted at, humiliated and often locked up and deprived of friends and family. They also frequently are beaten, burned, cut and sometimes sexually abused.

Reports indicate that it is most often the lady of the house who inflicts punishment, but children may also suffer at the hands of the man of the house, the children, other workers or even visitors to the house. Many children will try to run away and, if they succeed, find themselves on the streets and vulnerable to other forms of violence from different torturers.

Girls living on the streets are not often visible and may survive by working in prostitution. Boys live more openly on the streets, generally in a gang that takes the place of family and friends. There is violence both within the gangs, as older children impose their will on younger members, and towards the gangs by other gangs and by police who round them up and treat them roughly.

Children living on the streets are also subjected to sexual abuse and drug culture. Isolated from family and home, they are easy prey for those who wish to abuse them or profit from their situation.

Actions to end violence and protect children

There is much to be done to end violence against children in West and Central Africa. It is still largely tolerated in most countries of the region and practices that are harmful to children are trivialized, accepted and even seen positively by adults who pass this on from one generation to another. The most important challenge facing West and Central African societies, therefore, is changing the attitudes and behaviour of those who believe that violence against children is acceptable. For this to happen, community, traditional and religious structures that have influence over people's behaviours must be mobilized. The media, too, can play an important role in improving understanding of the rights of children to be protected from violence and to enjoy a childhood in which education, health and freedom from abuse are guaranteed.

> ***Community, traditional and religious structures that have influence over people's behaviours must be mobilized. The media, too, can play an important role in improving understanding of the rights of children to be protected from violence.***

If programmes for sensitization and mobilization are to be appropriately designed, then there is a need for better and more data on violence against children in the region. This should take into account the context and evolution of family structures. Analysing existing reports from hospitals, clinics and psychiatric treatment centres would be a first step in fully understanding the scope and impact of violence against children.

Appropriate treatment of children and a sense that everything must be done to ensure their health and well-being begins with national policies, programmes and budgets dedicated to early childhood development – community services adapted to the needs of infants and young children. These must provide health services, adequate nutrition, education, water and sanitation, both at home and in the community.

The various groups that have a responsibility for community safety, including that of children, must be better trained and helped to do their work more effectively. Health workers and police are obvious players in efforts to protect children from violence. Legal and administrative proceedings with which children are confronted also need to be adapted to be more 'child-friendly' and to take account of children's needs and vulnerabilities. All such procedures need to give credit to the child's world by allowing children to give testimony in ways that ensure their safety and security and put them at ease. Informing children, listening to their opinions and supporting their participation in decisions and finding solutions are vital to helping them to protect themselves.

If harmful traditional practices are to be resisted, then it is communities themselves that must be brought on board as partners. Involving men and traditional and religious leaders is particularly important, since they will influence others to change their attitudes and behaviour. This will take time and will involve grassroots organizations that work with the communities. Their capacity to act should be reinforced through training and support.

All these actions will only be effective if there is political support for them. National and local authorities, members of parliament and those in the media who influence decision-makers must be mobilized in a concerted campaign to end harmful practices. Efforts to spread the messages of the International Day against FGM might be considered. A movement to end female genital cutting emerged in Senegal in the latter half of the 1990s and has had significant impact: more than 1,500 communities in that country have abandoned the practice and have made public declarations rejecting practices harmful to health. This represents one-third of the communities in Senegal that practice FGM.

Early marriage will only end when there are clear laws in place outlawing it and these are strictly implemented, even where customary or traditional laws may exist. Getting girls into school and helping them to stay there is important, also, since in time this strengthens the decision-making power of girls and women. Convincing parents of the value of keeping girls in school is both positive for the longer-term development of girl children and also likely to deter them from marrying off daughters at an early age. In countries where the legal age for marriage is set below 18, it is important to raise the legal age and also ensure that the same age applies for both boys and girls. It is also vital to enforce the legal age for marriage in the face of pressures to accept customs or traditions that contract it.

Early marriage will only end when there are clear laws in place outlawing it and these are strictly implemented.

For some years, infanticide has decreased in certain regions of Benin, thanks to maternity wards, monitoring of pregnancy and newborn babies and condemnation of the practice in the Beninese penal code. A new law introduced in May 2005 in the Democratic Republic of Congo for the first time specifically prohibits accusations of witchcraft, a first for the region.

Largely as a result of international efforts, more and more projects have been set up to support children affected by HIV/AIDS. The ‘action framework’ developed through the joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS recognizes the importance of not stigmatizing AIDS orphans by targeting them directly, but promotes integration of programmes to support them in other initiatives, for example those aimed at reducing poverty.

The action framework comprises five major strategies: reinforcing family means for protecting and taking care of orphans and vulnerable children; mobilizing and supporting community initiatives for the support of vulnerable households; guaranteeing the access of orphans and vulnerable children to essential services, including education, health care and birth registration; ensuring that governments protect the most vulnerable children through better policies, laws and resources; and taking action to raise awareness at all levels, through promotion and social involvement, to create a favourable environment for children affected by HIV/AIDS.

There remains much to be done in this area, but the states of West and Central Africa have committed to take this group of children into account in their national policies.

One important action that must be taken is to ensure that young people have access to information on how HIV/AIDS is transmitted and how to prevent it. Any strategies reaching out to young people should take account of their specific situations: whether they are married or single, for example, and whether they are in or out of school.

The protection of children during and after conflicts is the responsibility of the state and the international community. One of the difficulties of setting up support programmes for war-affected families is that they must take a multidisciplinary approach and aim to reduce psychological trauma, promote a culture of non-violence, wipe out stigma and discrimination, and also address practical and immediate needs such as developing ways for families to earn a living, and for people to train for working life. At the same time, post-conflict reconstruction must go beyond individual needs and take into account the rebuilding of relationships of trust that are so necessary if communities are to grow peacefully. One important element of this rebuilding of trust is some mechanism for redress: in Sierra Leone, for example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established after the war has given child victims the opportunity to recount their experiences, both as victims and as perpetrators of violence. Such mechanisms not only establish the facts but play a therapeutic role and prepare a new beginning.

For children who have lost family and community, institutional life may be the only option. Social workers in institutions need special training to deal with the needs of children potentially traumatized by loss. Alternative solutions must also be found for the longer-term reintegration of these children, potentially in foster families prepared to take them and supported in this. These children also need to be able to go to school or into vocational training, depending on their age, so that they can have hope of a future where they are able to support themselves.

In January 2004, a set of guidelines was drawn up for agencies working with separated or unaccompanied children. These aim to ensure that all measures and decisions taken regarding separated children are based on the concept of child protection and respect for family unity and the best interests of the child. Guidelines have also been developed aimed at preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence against refugees, returnees and internally displaced people. These were revised in 2003. They aim to guide actions undertaken by refugee communities themselves for preventing and treating violence in their midst.

The absence of legal texts allows ministries to close their eyes to corporal punishment in schools and, even when a teacher is disciplined, it is usually by being transferred to a different school where he can continue to behave in the same way.

In relation to violence in schools, there are few laws in the region that specifically regulate the behaviour of teachers or that enable sexual harassment and corporal punishment to be sanctioned. Although there are general statutes for the civil service, disciplinary committees are generally ineffective. The absence of legal texts allows ministries to close their eyes to the practices and, even when a teacher is disciplined, it is usually by being transferred to a different school where he can in fact continue to behave in the same way.

The fact that laws against corporal punishment and abuse in schools do not exist is a reflection of the general tolerance that prevails around this issue and the walls of silence that surround it. Pupils are afraid of reporting abuse because they might be blamed or removed from school. Families pass on their responsibility of protection to the teacher and then are unwilling to take it back if the teacher abuses it. Families are particularly reluctant to act on sexual abuse involving their daughters for fear of bringing shame on the family. Thus the abused girl becomes the guilty party, seen as responsible for tarnishing the family honour.

Teachers explain their behaviour, too, by putting the blame on the children. They claim that it is natural to feel attracted to young girls who, in any case, may wear provocative clothes and ‘lead them on’. They say that their relations with pupils are part of their private life and outside the control of their superiors. Head teachers often defend teachers against claims from children and families.

Some measures do exist, however, to deal with sexual abuse in schools. Although limited, they focus on raising people’s awareness of the issue and helping all parties to understand their rights. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Ministry of Women and the Family has set up more than 900 children’s committees in schools and childcare associations in Kinshasa and the provinces with the help of the Ministry of Primary, Secondary and Professional Education. The committees run awareness campaigns with children covering sexual violence, child prostitution and HIV/AIDS.

People’s attitudes and behaviour towards Koranic schools are ambiguous. On the one hand public opinion condemns the economic exploitation of children by Koranic teachers and, on the other hand, people continue to fuel child begging. This says a lot about the complexity of this problem, which has religious, social and economic connotations. In addition to increased training and awareness on the rights of children, aimed at teachers and parents and focusing on the damaging effects of begging on children, teaching conditions in Koranic schools need to be improved and minimum standards must be put in place.

In the area of children in conflict with the law, it is important that all systems, procedures and staffing set up to deal with children in custody take account of the fact that the child is still a child. In addition to the human rights due to all people in short- or long-term detention, the child has specific rights that take account of a child's special needs, including for support, advice and protection from abuse and violence. In particular, a 48-hour limit on police custody should be respected so that the child does not 'get lost in the system'.

This presumes understanding and training for 'child-friendly' police officers, magistrates, social services staff and others who come into contact with children in the legal system so that they can best serve both justice and the interests of the child. Children need legal help, support in giving testimony and protection from any possible reprisals.

All systems, procedures and staffing set up to deal with children in custody must take account of the fact that the child is still a child.

In particular, each country must set and respect a minimum age for criminal responsibility. International instruments call for this to be at least 13 years of age. Reducing penalties also take account of the need for children to overcome difficult periods and be helped to reconstruct their future, as does giving a child the possibility to attend classes while in detention, including vocational training to prepare the child to enter work when appropriate and earn a living. Where possible, alternatives to prison should be set up so that children do not suffer the psychological trauma of adult prison and the risk of violence and abuse that this can entail.

In this region, legal dispositions for the protection of children in conflict with the law are generally inadequate. Current legislation provides few alternatives to prison. There is much to be done, and international agencies such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, which implements technical cooperation projects aimed at preventing juvenile delinquency, improving the legal system for minors and reinforcing support for children in conflict with the law, can help.

While the area known as 'juvenile justice' remains a challenge in the region, there has been some progress in combating child labour, which puts so many children at risk of many forms of violence. Most countries in West and Central Africa have adopted laws and ratified international treaties banning child labour. As in many other parts of the world, however, children who work as domestic labourers in the homes of other people are not included in these laws, partly because of the difficulty of legislating what goes on in a private home but also because of firmly held views that these children are not at risk. This is not the case and the high risks that children in domestic labour face must be recognized in law. Some countries have now acknowledged that child domestic labour is in fact so high-risk that it should be included on their list of 'worst forms' of child labour. It would be a start to signal recognition of the risks involved by specifically including it in general child labour laws.

If children are to be spared the risks inherent in premature work, then school must become a viable option. All school-age children should be enrolled in school but also learning must be seen as useful, and parents must both want and be able to send their children to school. For this to happen, vulnerable families may need help in finding ways to earn enough money for the family to survive without sending a child to work, and schools must be within a reasonable distance and be seen as safe. If 'normal' school is not an option, then there should be programmes offering non-formal education for children and indeed for adults so that the doors to the world of work are open to those whose responsibility it is to support the family.

Most countries in the region have made efforts to tackle the trafficking of children, although it remains a great challenge. They came together in 2000, with UNICEF and ILO cooperation, and developed the Libreville Platform, which is an important agreement promoting cross-border cooperation and information sharing. These are vital if the movement of children from country to country is to be reduced, although it does not necessarily take account of movement of children within a country, for example from the countryside to the city into domestic labour. Combating trafficking requires dedicated resources too, though, and countries do need to back up the agreement with more staff, funding and training. One problem is that the people who traffic children reap a substantial profit and spend this in part to bribe border guards and officials to turn a blind eye to what is happening.

There are few programmes in the region that take account of the ongoing support and treatment that children need when they have confronted violence.

Children who have been trafficked, abused in child domestic labour or indeed who have fallen victim to violence in other areas need long-term help. The physical impact of the violence inflicted on them is relatively easy to diagnose and treat. The longer-term psychological impact is generally invisible and often forgotten. There are few programmes in the region that take account of the ongoing support and treatment that children need when they have confronted violence. Their special needs also need to be taken into account at a practical level. They cannot just go back to school or start work if they are of working age, or simply rejoin the family and community. They need help in all these areas and that means trained people who understand that and can provide the support they need.

Often children themselves are the best support for other children. In 1994, in Côte d'Ivoire, children and young workers came together and formed associations with the support of state services, churches and African NGOs. These associations are grouped together under the banner of the African Movement for Children and Young Workers (Mouvement Africain des Enfants et Jeunes Travailleurs -- MAEJT). Together they work for the human and socio-economic rights of children, including those already working. Today MAEJT comprises associations in 53 towns in 14 countries of West and Central Africa.

The enormous growth in children living and working on the streets and at risk of violence is a sign of family breakdown. Work to reduce family poverty would make a difference, although it would not solve the problem completely. Seventeen countries in the region have drawn up, or are preparing, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers or PRSPs, one way in which the international financial institutions can work with countries to set priorities for development and support for this. Sadly, not a single PRSP in the region takes account of the links between poverty, development and children on the streets. There is a great need for advocacy actions that remind governments that not only are children central to development, but development must take account of children.

Children on the streets need the same services as children who live with their family. They need health care, education, social facilities and a means to learn skills to earn a living. The fact that they may move around makes supplying these services difficult. Organizations like the NGO ENDA Tiers Monde, Terre des Hommes and the Red Cross work with street children. They go out onto the streets to meet the children, provide medical and psychosocial support and a chance to attend school or vocational classes, and try to mediate with the family so that the child can return home. In the absence of such outreach programmes, children at least need to know there is somewhere they can go to find help or maybe just a bed and a meal. There should be child-focused reception centres that are adapted to their needs. Some do exist in the region but in general these are often not child-friendly. Children will only seek help if they can see that it is useful. This means understanding what children need, and the best way to do this is to ask children and listen to what they say.

Gaps and challenges

Clearly there are many challenges facing West and Central Africa if violence against children is to end. The regional consultation emphasized some specific areas where the participants agreed that more must be done as a matter of priority.

It is clear, for example, that any actions that are taken must involve communities themselves, because the community and the families and groupings that make up the community are at the heart of the problem but also are the first place where solutions can be found. It is important that those elements of family and community life that work to protect children should be fully understood and reinforced. Their role in the community should be strengthened and they should be used to influence other parts of the community, to help people to better understand the terrible impact violence has on children, especially when it is inflicted by people they love and trust. Communities are also best placed to keep watch on children and intervene quickly if there are warning signs, for example if a family faces a sudden crisis that puts children at risk.

Governments must ensure that laws are in place and that everyone knows what those laws are. A good start would be to bring all national laws into line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

If communities are to act on behalf of children, though, they need a legal basis on which to do it. This means that governments must ensure that laws are in place and that everyone knows what those laws are. They should set national standards for those who take care of children, in the community, at school and in state systems such as the justice system. They also need to include standards and provisions for taking care of children who have been victims of violence, and community and family structures need to be in place to provide a safe haven for the child in the long term.

A good start would be to bring all national laws into line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and other legal instruments that states have ratified, for example ILO Convention (1999) No.182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour. A major challenge is dealing with contradictions between national laws and customary or religious practices.

Where laws do exist, they are useless if they are not properly put into practice. The police and judiciary should be trained and supported to do their job. The pressure, for example, to set aside the law in the face of 'tradition' is compelling, but it must be faced. Only with strong support from government and community leaders can this be done.

The same is true of ministries and other authorities charged with child welfare. They should be reinforced and given the resources they need to do their job, including adequate funding, training and a legal and regulatory framework that allows them to act. Leadership is vital if these arms of government are to function well, as is cooperation between the different sections of government. One factor that has always to be borne in mind is that people tend to move from ministry to ministry regularly, and that re-training has to be provided and continuity ensured.

Before anything can be done, though, the problem of lack of reliable data needs to be addressed. It is clear that one of the problems facing this region, as others, is that there is not a clear picture of the total situation of violence against children, or indeed of other challenges facing children. What data do exist tend to relate to specific groups of children (for example those already in school) and so programmes set up tend also to address these children. Only when the 'big picture' exists can actions be taken that include all children and enable long-term planning for the good of all children.

The media have an important role to play in documenting the issues, outlining the actions taken and contributing to change. Their ability to influence attitudes and behaviours needs to be mobilized, and this is best done by reinforcing their capacities through child-focused training.

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The precarious financial situation of many press outlets needs to be taken into account, since this often leads to press owners pushing for ‘quick fix’ stories rather than in-depth coverage of social issues. International agencies and national agencies can play a part here in looking upon journalists as partners, supporting their training and rewarding their efforts, for example through awards and prizes for good reporting on issues relating to children.

Last but by no means least, children themselves need to be involved in plans and actions that affect their lives. There has been some progress on this in West and Central Africa: youth associations and movements are beginning to spring up across the region and children are becoming more actively involved in development and in protection against violence. Not all children can participate in these formal groupings, though, and it is important that children outside them also have a chance to express their views. Outreach programmes, for example with children living on the streets, are important and can be used simply to talk to children and ask for their views on their needs and how these can be met.

Families and communities are still by and large closed to the value of what children say and do. The value of the child does not lie only in the future of the family but in the present: children have rights today, and families and communities have a duty to ensure that children enjoy those rights – all of them – while they also learn that their rights bring responsibilities towards the family and society.

Children and families must be given a chance to discover their joint rights and responsibilities and can only do this if the demands of daily existence are not an ongoing battle. Reducing poverty, avoiding conflict, protecting human rights – all of these underpin the everyday reality of children’s lives and are the responsibility, ultimately, of the state.

Recommendations and next steps

By the close of the regional consultation, a number of recommendations had been developed to feed into the United Nations Secretary-General’s Study on Violence against Children, and these were presented in the closing session. The children’s spokesperson said that the children and young people present hoped that the recommendations would not be forgotten and that governments, agencies and associations would "undertake openly and firmly to put in place the recommendations formulated by all the participants". The children acknowledged that they, too, have duties such as respecting their parents, teachers and adults in general, but reminded everyone that they cannot live up to these duties if adults do not play their part in acknowledging their duty: respecting the rights of children and ensuring that they are fulfilled.

Professor Pinheiro reiterated the importance of follow-up and said he hoped that, when the Study was complete, everyone present would take its recommendations and put them into action sooner rather than later.

The journalists present outlined a concrete step they planned to take to show their commitment: they created CJONET – Child Journalist Network (REJAPE – Réseau de journalistes africains pour la protection des enfants). The network will add value to efforts already made at national levels to better integrate the importance of the rights of children into journalists' work. It proposes to inform its members of violence perpetrated against children, to sensitize the public and alert more and more journalists to the rights of the child and the responsibilities of governments. The network will also create a website at the address of African Press for Children's Rights: www.apcr.org.

Religious and traditional chiefs participating in the meeting put forward their recommendations and emphasized the need to involve subregional organizations, and to integrate the issue of violence against children in poverty reduction strategies. They reiterated the importance of stimulating research at all levels so that better and more complete data would be available. This is considered vital if realistic and effective programmes are to be scaled up to a national level, they said, and to avoid stigmatization.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA FOR THE UN SECRETARY-GENERAL'S STUDY ON VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

I. General Recommendations

Principles

- Children have rights but they also have duties: they must respect their parents, their teachers and their employers; by the same token parents must respect their children.

Raising awareness

- Break the culture of silence
- Develop awareness campaigns on the long-term consequences of violence against children: involve the whole community, including religious and traditional leaders, the media and children; encourage dialogue between parents and children; promote non-violent discipline methods;
- Oblige governments and parents to register births

Participation of children

- Ensure the participation of children at every stage of the process of formulating projects, programmes and policies put in place for the protection of children;
- Support organisations and initiatives for children to prevent and fight against all forms of violence committed against children.

Legislation

- Adopt and apply laws abolishing violence against children: explicitly forbid corporal punishment as well as all forms of violence within the family, in schools and in institutions; in judicial proceedings develop specific mechanisms that take into account the word of children (giving testimony, the integrity of the child, etc.).

- Facilitate the procedure for indictments on violence, notably sexual violence committed against children;
- Adopt and apply the optional Protocol of the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

Budget

- Increase the national budget allocation for programmes for protecting children against violence;
- Take into account the problematic of protecting vulnerable children in poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSP).

Training

- Put in place, at a community level, training on human rights by involving all the local actors, including young people and children, parents, teachers, community and religious leaders, the media, social workers and other partners;
- Adopt and implement intensive training programmes for judges, magistrates, educationalists, teachers, police officers, prison warders, customs officials etc. on listening techniques and management of child victims.

Coordination/integration

- Strengthen partnerships between United Nations agencies, NGOs, communities and other agencies working on questions linked to violence committed against children.

Services

- Put in place appropriate methods for assisting children who are victims of physical, psychological and sexual violence;
- Create a favourable environment for listening to children through the introduction of: listening centres accessible to children; toll-free telephone numbers in order to break the wall of silence;
- Create and strengthen the juvenile liaison police and their interaction with partners in protection.

II. Specific Recommendations

1. Violence within families

- Support parents in the development of non-violent education: make parents aware of alternative discipline methods; explain to parents the consequences of corporal punishment; explain children's rights.
- Initiate and support national surveys on the causes of violence in families, including sexual violence, by taking into account the opinions of children.

2. Community violence

- Vote in laws abolishing excision and put in place measures for applying these laws;
- Raise the minimum legal age of marriage to 18 and institute parity between men and women regarding the age of marriage;
- Encourage a wide debate in national and local forums on traditional and modern (paedophilia, sex tourism, pornography) practices that are harmful to children, including the effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic: involve traditional and modern media forms; concentrate on the needs identified by the young people themselves particularly regarding questions of reproductive health;
- Introduce into all types and levels of teaching curricula, training modules on the fight against harmful traditional practices, the prevention of HIV/AIDS and the culture of peace.

3. Violence linked to conflicts

- Adopt and apply the optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict;
- Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes should take into account the needs of children who are victims of the conflict, notably with regard to special and specific education, professional training and psychological support in order to give them alternative options to that of war;
- Initiate and support research on the repercussions of armed conflict on the breaking down of traditional social support systems, the impact of violence on the relationships between men/women, parents/children and on the way that violence has become an everyday feature of life.

4. Violence linked to HIV/AIDS

- Expose the violence (psychological, discriminatory) inflicted on children affected and infected by HIV/AIDS (marginalization of families where the parents are ill; stigmatization of infected or affected children). Put an end to this stigmatization by supporting positive messages;
- Strengthen the means available to families to protect and take care of orphans and vulnerable children (by concentrating on the attitudes and cultural values of cooperation and solidarity).

5. Violence in schools and institutions

- Abolish corporal punishment in schools and propose alternative non-violent discipline methods to teachers in consultation with children;
- Train and raise awareness among national educational personnel on respecting the rights of the child: school inspectors, directors, teachers, children and the personnel who work in educational establishments;
- Develop children's committees in schools whose role is to lead awareness-raising activities among other children on the prevention of violence (promote peer education). Establish links between the children's committees and social structures;
- Create and support advice centres in schools and train counsellors on listening to and advising children who are victims of violence and on the rights of children;
- Raise awareness and inform parents of the exploitative situation in which some children find themselves when they are entrusted to Koranic teachers and other institutions;
- Define and apply minimum standards for taking care of children in Koranic schools with the aim of improving the quality of life and education for children. Document and distribute the good practices of some Koranic schools;
- Encourage the community and parents to be more involved in the school and other institutions that are frequented by children, including Koranic schools, to better prevent and respond to violence against children;
- Strengthen research on situations (causes and consequences) of violence inflicted on children in schools and institutions.

6. Juvenile justice

- Implement guidelines developed through international tools on the conditions for detaining children who are in conflict with the law, particularly: institute a minimum age of 13 for criminal responsibility; introduce sentences that are lighter; separate children from adults in the police stations and in prisons (men from boys and girls from women); develop alternative measures to imprisonment (financial and human support, establish minimum standards); develop retraining educational programmes in children's detention centres; increase the number of courts for children and their resources; train more judges for children and increase the social services in law courts;
- Train and raise awareness amongst magistrates and representatives of the law, and social workers, on the procedures and mechanisms for the protection of children in conflict with the law.

7. Violence in the workplace

- Ratify and apply ILO Convention (1973) No.138 concerning Minimum Age for Admission to Employment and ILO Convention (1999) No.182 concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour;
- Create and implement a national action plan to end violence in the workplace. Draft and enforce laws to combat the worst forms of child labour, including child slavery and forced recruitment of children with a view to using them in armed conflicts;
- Develop and implement strategies for raising awareness and mobilizing it among children, families, the media and communities on the basis of a better knowledge of the rights and risks run by children. Pay particular attention to: the risks attached to starting work very young (including in the family context); the dangers of children moving outside the parental unit and the practice of placing children: the risk of exploitation, emotional isolation, mistreatment, sexual abuse and of recruitment into armed groups; the dangers attached to certain sectors identified as the most dangerous; the involvement of women in awareness programmes who have worked in domestic service.
- Strengthen the capacities of governments, NGOs and communities in giving psychological support to child victims, particularly girls who have been caught up in prostitution and children who have worked in slave conditions and street children;

- All the partners and particularly governments must raise awareness among employers and put in place measures to ensure that the work being done by young workers, including those working on the streets, is done in a secure environment;
- When children are working, governments and partners should collaborate to raise awareness and encourage employers to assume their responsibilities to supply them with their basic needs necessary for them in the course of their work;
- Develop alternative education programmes for child labourers.

III. Recommendations for following up on the Consultation

The participants of the regional consultation on violence against children asked:

- Governments to publish the desk review of the region and the recommendations of the consultations at a national level to create a dialogue framework with the nomination of a focal point to draw up, in collaboration with civil society representatives, national action plans on the implementation of the recommendations on violence against children;
- Governments to put in place national mechanisms to strengthen collaboration between civil society, parliamentarians, governments, agencies, NGOs and other actors to ensure follow up on the regional consultation and the United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children;
- Governments, international organizations and NGOs to lend their support to coalitions and networks of children's associations to promote dialogue and information exchange;
- Governments, international organizations, NGOs and civil society to put in place a monitoring of the recommendations of the study: through regional and subregional organizations such as the AU, ECOWAS (peer review); at national level with the involvement of ministers responsible for protection, youth associations, national committees responsible for the Committee on the Rights of the Child;
- Religious and community leaders to continue the dialogue at a local level on violence against children, including violence in schools and institutions, and to undertake to improve the living conditions and education of children;
- Governments and international organizations and NGOs to strengthen awareness campaigns on violence against children and strengthen the existing protection networks;
- UNICEF and other agencies present at the consultation to coordinate the monitoring of activities.

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