



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

Annual Report to the Human Rights Council



Investing in child protection and violence prevention should be seen as a vaccine to end the pandemic of violence against children.



2022

Annual Report to the Human Rights Council

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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social, and cultural
rights, including the right to development



OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF
THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

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The SRSG is a global independent advocate in favour of the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against children. The SRSG acts as a bridge builder and a catalyst of actions in all regions, and across sectors and settings where violence against children may occur. She mobilizes action and political support to maintain momentum around this agenda and generate renewed concern at the harmful effects of violence on children; to promote behavioural and social change and to achieve effective progress.

The mandate of the SRSG is anchored in human rights standards, promoting the universal ratification and effective implementation of core international conventions. The SRSG cooperates closely with human rights bodies and mechanisms, with UN funds and programmes and specialized agencies, and with regional organizations. She also promotes cooperation with national institutions and civil society organizations, including children and young people.

I Introduction



In the present report, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children reviews actions she has taken at the global, regional and national levels to fulfil her mandate and provides an overview of the results achieved. The report highlights how violence against children has increased, while becoming less visible, during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and outlines why investing in strengthened and integrated services for children is essential to the realization of the vision of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

There is strong evidence that violence against children in the home, the community and online has increased during the two years of pandemic, and there is evidence of a related increase in gender-based violence. The severe socioeconomic impact of the disease has increased the risks of child labour, child sexual exploitation, trafficking

and smuggling, child marriage and the enrolment of children in criminal and armed groups. In addition, ongoing crises caused by conflict, food insecurity, climate change, natural disasters and political instability continue to expose children to multiple forms of violence.

Even before the advent of COVID-19, data show that about half of the world's children are exposed to violence every year. Close to 300 million children aged 2–4 regularly experience violent discipline at the hands of their caregivers. A third of students aged 11–15 worldwide have been bullied by their peers in the past month and it is estimated that about 120 million girls suffer some form of forced sexual contact before age 20. Emotional violence affects one in three children and one in four children worldwide lives with a mother who is the victim of intimate partner violence.

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Violence has devastating immediate, lifelong and intergenerational effects on children and their families. Violence kills children: in 2017, an estimated 40,150 children were victims of homicide, accounting for 8.4 per cent of all homicides. Violence impairs children's brain development, severely harms their physical and mental health and undermines their ability to learn. The direct impacts of violence against children also impose substantial economic costs on individuals, communities and Governments. Violence in childhood limits the development of individuals as they grow into adulthood, and the cost of this unrealized potential holds back the social and economic development of society.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, efforts to eliminate violence against children were moving too slowly – those efforts must be accelerated. Building on the lessons of the pandemic and other crises, the provision of integrated and multisectoral services that are accessible to all children without discrimination must now be seen as a key investment to build back better during the pandemic and beyond.

Accelerating action to end violence against children by 2030

During the reporting period, the Special Representative has continued to use her mandate to advance children's protection from violence through her advocacy, advisory and bridge-building roles.

Supporting Member States in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Key to the Special Representative's outreach is her close engagement with Member States as they prepare their voluntary national reviews for the high-level political forum on sustainable development. To support those efforts, the Office of the Special Representative has developed guidance on how they can use their voluntary review processes to identify and report on promising practices to prevent and respond to violence against children. In 2020, the Office also prepared an [evaluation of the national reviews](#) to draw out and share the main themes, messages and lessons learned on progress towards the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals related to violence against children and its drivers.

The Special Representative met with 38 Member States that were presenting their voluntary national reviews at the 2021 high-level forum at an early stage in their preparatory process, encouraging them to adopt an integrated approach to preventing and ending violence against children and its drivers across the 2030 Agenda. She also stressed the role of children as key actors on this issue and suggested ways to support their active engagement in the preparation of the reviews.

In addition, the Special Representative mobilized entities of the United Nations system at the regional and country levels. In her discussions with United Nations regional commissions, resident coordinators and country teams, she stressed their shared responsibility to support Governments in mainstreaming children's rights in efforts to implement the Sustainable Development Goals, including children's protection from violence, and the need for comprehensive

and integrated approaches. The Special Representative also engaged directly in preparatory processes for the voluntary national reviews at the national level in several Member States.

In the lead-up to the high-level political forum, the Office of the Special Representative collaborated with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in organizing an expert group meeting to assess progress and challenges in ending all forms of violence against children (target 16.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals), including the impact of the pandemic. The Special Representative also participated in the integration dialogues organized by the Vice-President of the Economic and Social Council in preparation for the integration segment of the high-level political forum.

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The high-level political forum, which was focused on the theme of sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, was an opportunity to highlight lessons learned during the pandemic on how to strengthen the protection of children from violence. The Special Representative was a lead discussant at the panel discussion on the theme "How

do we get on track for building more peaceful, equal and inclusive societies", which explored the importance of making linkages across the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Office of the Special Representative and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) also co-organized a "voluntary national review lab" at the high-level forum, bringing together representatives of Governments, the United Nations, children, young people and international financial institutions to explore how to create voluntary national reviews that are child-sensitive and inclusive. The discussions at the lab, the need to prioritize investment in integrated systems of social services for children was emphasized.

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In addition, at the high-level political forum, the Office of the Special Representative and the Group of Friends of Mental Health and Well-being organized a high-level event to emphasize the urgent need to address the impact of violence on children's mental health while building back better, ensuring that mental health is an integral part of universal health coverage. Coinciding with the event, the Office of the Special Representative launched a multimedia campaign based on a series of videos on mental health, featuring children from 19 countries across all regions, who shared their experiences and suggestions on how best to support mental well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In examining the voluntary national reviews and presentations made by Member States during the high-level political forum in 2021, the Office of the Special Representative identified a





number of key points. Although integrated approaches are increasingly being pursued by Member States to prevent and respond to violence against children, information on such action is not consistently being included in their reviews. In addition, while more Member States are reporting progress on addressing specific forms of violence against children, the interlinked and co-occurring nature of different forms of violence – both online and offline – could be highlighted to a greater degree. While many Member States stressed the plight of children in vulnerable situations in their reviews there was limited reporting on action taken to ensure their protection and care. The positive impact of a system-wide approach by the United Nations system at the country level to support Member States in preparing their reviews was also noted.

The process of preparing voluntary national reviews is an opportunity to engage children as agents of change. Reviews in 2021 highlighted a range of ways in which Member States pursued this goal, including: using surveys and opinion polls to seek children's views and input; holding in-person and online focus groups with children; providing opportunities for children to engage with decision makers and national legislative bodies; and using

existing structures such as children's parliaments and advisory councils.

These experiences have informed the development of practical guidance for Member States by the Office of the Special Representative on involving children in the voluntary national review process. This guidance stresses the need to position children as a distinct age group and to involve both younger children and adolescents. It also recommends that Governments include the views of children in their reporting, prioritizing consultation with children from vulnerable groups to ensure that no child is left behind.

To stress the urgent need for investment in integrated and effective responses to the increased violence faced by children in times of crisis, the Office of the Special Representative collaborated with the co-chairs of the Group of Friends of Children and the Sustainable Development Goals, the European Union and UNODC to organize a high-level side event during the seventy-sixth session of the General Assembly. The event also benefited from the views and recommendations of representatives of children's advisory committees from the global campaign, "It's still Time to Talk about Children's Views on Work".



As co-organizer of the 2021 World Congress on Justice with Children, the Special Representative used the multistakeholder preparatory processes and the plenary sessions to stress the need to rethink the role of justice for and with children to meet the needs and the rights of the most marginalized and to promote a child rights-based approach to violence prevention, alternatives to the deprivation of liberty and sustainable rehabilitation and reintegration. The Congress adopted the Global Declaration on Justice with Children, an outcome document drafted jointly with children, which outlines actions to be taken by Member States



and civil society, in partnership with children, to build frameworks, procedures and services addressing the needs of marginalized children and ensure their equitable access to justice, both in emergency and non-emergency contexts.

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Building on these important processes and based on a wide consultation with partners and experts, the Office of the Special Representative developed practical guidance, identifying

good practices and key components of a comprehensive approach to accessing justice for children.

The Special Representative participated as a keynote speaker in the World Anti-Bullying Forum 2021, held in Stockholm, which brought together over 700 delegates from 40 countries to share knowledge and experiences from different disciplines and regions in tackling bullying.

Significantly, participants at the Forum proposed a revised definition of bullying, to include not only the digital dimension, but also the role of culture and norms, and highlighted the need for a participatory and inclusive approach to the problem, involving schools and communities. In addition, the Office of the Special Representative provided support to the drafting of the biannual resolution of the General Assembly on protecting children from bullying, which addresses its negative effects on the mental health and education of children. This encourages Member States to provide support and counselling to children who experience bullying, as well as collecting the necessary data to underpin effective prevention and response efforts.



Country Visit



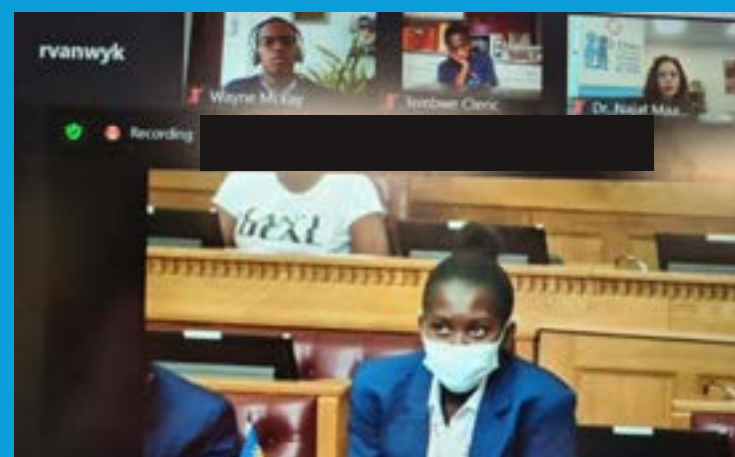
Advocacy at the national level remains a critical component of the work of the Special Representative. With the easing of travel restrictions, the Special Representative was able to resume in-person country visits, in addition to ongoing online communication.

At the invitation of the Government of the Philippines, the Special Representative undertook a virtual visit to the country in April 2021. Through dialogue with the leaders of relevant ministries and stakeholders, the Special Representative helped to assess progress and challenges in the implementation of the national plan of action to end violence against children. The dialogue highlighted the need to increase budgetary allocations for integrated social services for children and to respond to the potential long-term impact of the pandemic.

In June 2021, the Special Representative was the keynote speaker at the National Policy Dialogue on Ending Violence Against Children in Nigeria, which took stock of the country's achievements since 2017 when it became a pathfinder country within the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children. This was an opportunity to reaffirm the country's

commitment to ensuring that every child lives in a nourishing, enabling and safe environment, including through the implementation of the Child Rights Act of 2003, ensuring universal birth registration and investment in services that protect children affected by violence.

In July 2021, the Special Representative held a session with the Children's Parliament of Namibia, where she held an inspiring and interactive dialogue with around 30 child parliamentarians. Following this session, young parliamentarians were invited to join the national delegation to the high-level political forum. In November 2021, the Special Representative undertook a [country visit to Niger](#), in close cooperation



with the resident coordinator and the United Nations country team. Highlights of the visit included constructive dialogues with the President of Niger; key ministers; the National Commission for Human Rights; parliamentarians; members of civil society; traditional and religious leaders; representatives of children, youth and local communities; and representatives of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other partners and donors. There were also field visits to services and programmes in Niamey and Maradi. The Special Representative welcomed the strong commitment of the President to making education a national priority as a way to end gender-based violence and child marriage.

The Special Representative also undertook a [country visit to Chad](#) in November 2021, in close cooperation with United Nations partners on the ground. The Special Representative had fruitful exchanges with: the President of Chad and of the Transitional Military Council; the President of the National Transitional Council; key ministers; representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs) and the inter-faith platform; members of the diplomatic community; donors; representatives of the World Bank and IMF; as well as a network of children and young girls. The Special Representative also visited programmes and services dedicated to children, in addition to a detention facility and participated in the launch of the national campaign "Oranger le Tchad", which is aligned with the global campaign to end gender-based violence. The Special Representative and United Nations country team in Chad committed to work in close collaboration with the Government to ensure an inclusive and participatory national dialogue as part

of the drafting process for the new constitution and to ensure children and young people are engaged in it.

As a follow-up to the missions to Chad and the Niger, the Special Representative will continue to advocate at the highest level and to provide support to both Member States in close cooperation with all key stakeholders in order to ensure children are duly protected from all forms of violence. In 2021, the Special Representative had her third meeting with the First Lady of Colombia and a high-level Government delegation, which identified modalities of collaboration and technical support for the National Pedagogical and Prevention Strategy Against Corporal Punishment and Cruel, Humiliating or Degrading Treatment of Children and Adolescents, which is to be launched in December 2021. The meeting also paved the way for a country mission by the Special Representative in early 2022 to further support Colombia's efforts as a pathfinder country within the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children.

Country missions by the Special Representative to Jordan and Lebanon are planned for December 2021, in close cooperation with United Nations entities on the ground, with the aim of holding dialogues with key stakeholders, visiting programmes related to violence prevention and response, meeting with children and local communities and mobilizing policymakers and partners to invest in integrated services for children and their caregivers. The Special Representative has also offered support to Jordan in mainstreaming children's rights into its 2022 voluntary national review and to Lebanon in strengthening its efforts to end violence against children.

Strengthening collaboration and partnerships

Regional organizations: The Special Representative has continued to engage with organizations working at the regional level – particularly regional intergovernmental organizations – to advance children's right to freedom from violence.

A highlight of 2021 was the strengthened collaboration between the Office of the Special Representative and African partners. The regional strategy of the Office is built on close collaboration with regional mechanisms of the African Union – such as the African Union Commission – the Economic Commission for Africa and the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, as well as on the identification of key partners at every level across the region to pursue the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Agenda 2063 of the African Union and Africa's Agenda for Children 2040: Fostering an Africa Fit for Children to end violence against children. The Office engages with Member States and the regional economic communities to maximize the impact of its activities at the subregional level.

In November 2021, the Special Representative participated in person in the third African Girls' Summit, hosted by Niger and the African Union Commission, with the theme: "Culture, Human Rights and Accountability – Accelerating Elimination of Harmful Practices". The Summit brought together representatives from 35 member States of the African Union, more than 100 adolescents and over 1,500 stakeholders. The Summit provided the

opportunity for the Special Representative to have a dialogue with the African Union Commissioner for Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development and with representatives of Member States, international organizations and CSOs, as well as with traditional and religious leaders, including a meeting with children before the summit. With strong engagement by all stakeholders, the "Niamey Call to Action and Commitment on Eliminating Harmful Practices" was adopted as the outcome of the Summit.

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The Special Representative contributed to consultations that led to the adoption of the European Union Strategy on the Rights of the Child in March 2021, which includes combating violence against children as one of its six thematic priorities. The Special Representative also met with the Anti-Trafficking Coordinator of the European Union and explored possibilities for joint advocacy focused on ending child trafficking within the European Union and beyond, including through triangular cooperation between the European Union, the Special Representative and the African Union.

In addition, the Special Representative continued her strong engagement with the Council of Europe and her support for the implementation of its Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016–2021), which also includes ending violence against children as a priority.

The Special Representative has continued to strengthen her collaboration with Member States and key partners in the Middle East and North Africa region. Collaboration with the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia has been a core component of the work of the Special Representative on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals within the region. In March 2021, the Special Representative addressed Arab Governments during the Arab voluntary national review lab and during the special session on mental health organized as part of the 2021 Arab Forum for Sustainable Development. During the reporting period the Special Representative has also continued to strengthen her collaboration with the League of Arab States, which has led to an agreed set of joint priority activities for 2021 and 2022.

The Office of the Special Representative was widely engaged in a [five-day regional conference on ending violence against children in East Asia and the Pacific](#), held in November 2021. The



conference – co-hosted by UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO) – brought together governmental leaders and representatives from 25 countries, as well as participants from United Nations entities, regional bodies, civil society, youth networks and academia. A key pillar of the conference was ensuring that children and young people were involved extensively at all stages of the event, including the preparations. The Special Representative engaged directly with the child participants, integrating their recommendations into her advocacy to Member States and other stakeholders attending the conference.

In October 2021, the Special Representative participated in the launch of a Latin American and Caribbean [regional observatory](#) that gathers and analyses official data from 13 countries on early pregnancy; child, early and forced marriages and unions; and gender-based violence. It highlights the efforts made by States to improve knowledge about and evidence for strengthening the protection of girls from harmful practices. This initiative provides a good opportunity to build common practice among States within the region, sharing lessons learned and developing ways to strengthen national and local data that is relevant, accurate, reliable and disaggregated.

United Nations system: The Special Representative continues to strengthen collaboration within the United Nations system to promote child rights mainstreaming and children's protection from violence across the human rights, development, peace and security pillars, guided by the report of the Secretary-General, "[Our Common Agenda](#)".

As chair of the Inter-Agency Working

Group on Violence against Children, the Special Representative has continued to promote the sharing of information, joint action and a harmonized approach by United Nations entities to preventing and addressing all forms of violence against children in all settings.

Collaboration with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and the Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict has been particularly important and has generated several joint statements on key issues. The Office of the Special Representative joined the inter-agency network, United Nations Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict, and chairs its working group on a survivor-centred approach. In October 2021, the Special Representative issued a joint statement with the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict and the United Nations Special Envoy on Myanmar, urging all parties in Myanmar to immediately stop all child rights violations, including the recruitment, use and killing and maiming of children, ongoing attacks on schools and hospitals and the arbitrary detention of children.

The Special Representative has a particular concern about the increase in trafficking in children and has joined the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons in order to reinforce efforts to combat this crime through an integrated and coordinated approach. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the Office of the Special Representative have joined forces to explore children's online engagement, including how children are using online

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means for protection purposes, such as peer-to-peer support. They have convened a working group composed of United Nations agencies, the private sector and CSOs to make information available regarding online helplines and support systems in different regions. The group will identify and disseminate ways in which children and young people use the Internet to enhance their protection from violence and provide guidance on how to leverage and expand those systems. The Special Representative also supported the #YouthLead Innovation Festival organized by the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth by hosting a spotlight session on digital safety and violence online, targeting young people and identifying good practices for their health and well-being.

Civil society and faith-based organizations: The Special Representative continued her engagement with CSOs and faith-based organizations through quarterly [meetings](#) that provided opportunities to exchange information on global civil society initiatives and to explore opportunities for collaboration on violence against children among civil society actors in Geneva and New York. The Office of the Special Representative and the World

Organization of the Scout Movement have signed a [letter of collaboration](#) to promote the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. During the World Scout Conference in 2021 and the online jamboree "JOTA-JOTI", the Special Representative highlighted the key role of scouts as agents of change. In October 2021, the Office of the Special Representative and the World Organization co-organized a side event on the margins of the General Assembly to promote rights-based approaches to child safeguarding, with the participation of Member States, CSOs, sporting organizations and children.



In collaboration with Arigatou International, the Special Representative supported the "Wear My Shoes" campaign to mobilize children and adults, including religious leaders, policymakers, parents/ caregivers and educators, assisting with children's return to school and addressing the impact of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. By directly engaging with children through child-led podcasts, the campaign provides children with a platform to share their experiences and engage in intergenerational dialogue on their safe return to school, prioritizing their social, emotional and spiritual well-being.

Ending the deprivation of liberty of migrant children



More children than ever before are on the move. [According to UNICEF](#), more than 33 million children worldwide had been forcibly displaced by the end of 2020; children, who account for less than one third of the global population, account for almost half of the world's refugees. At all stages of their journey, children on the move are exposed to heightened risks of violence and other adverse childhood experiences that take a heavy toll on their well-being. While this situation before the COVID-19 pandemic was already grave, the current challenge is even greater.

Children on the move are children first and foremost, and their rights must move with them. Detaining children is never in their best interest and is a form of violence that violates their rights. Yet migrant children continue to be detained in over 100 countries. It is imperative

to prevent their detention and promote rights-based alternatives, especially given the increase in migration, displacement, trafficking and smuggling.

The Special Representative continues to lead the United Nations task force on children deprived of liberty and works with other partners to end migration-related detention and promote alternatives. Under her leadership, the task force prioritized child immigration detention in 2021.

The task force has seized the opportunities presented by global processes to prioritize this issue, including at the 2021 high-level political forum, which assessed Sustainable Development Goal target 10.7 on migration as well as target 16.2, as well as in the ongoing processes of implementation, follow-up and review of the Global Compact for Migration and the global compact on refugees. In October 2021, in collaboration with Colombia, Morocco, Portugal, Thailand and Turkey, the task force organized a [high-level side event](#) at the seventy-sixth session of the General Assembly to accelerate action on child immigration detention and to mobilize Member States in readiness for the [2022 International Migration Review Forum](#).

The Special Representative has strengthened collaboration with partners at the global, regional and national levels, including the United Nations Network on Migration and its working group on alternatives to detention and the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants. With inputs from the working group, the Special Representative stressed the urgent need to end child immigration detention during her engagement with countries that presented voluntary

national reviews in 2021.

Ending the detention of migrant children is urgent, and it is also feasible, given the many promising practices that can be emulated and scaled up. The Special Representative acknowledges the progress achieved to date, with successful alternatives now in place in more than [60 countries](#). Many of these practices have been widely documented by the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, the working group on [alternatives to detention](#), UNICEF and the [International Detention Coalition](#), as well as by the Office of the Special Representative.

Countries are [adopting legislation](#) and policies prohibiting the detention of migrant children. They are creating inclusive, child- and gender-sensitive migration policies to integrate migrant children into national child protection systems, including guardianship and foster care, and facilitating children's access to documentation, including temporary visas and residence. They are also working to enhance children's access to housing, education, health, justice and child and social protection services, to strengthen transnational child protection mechanisms, to introduce non-custodial and community-based alternatives and, above all, to ensure that migrant children are released from detention. The Special Representative emphasizes that the most successful policies are those that integrate a social, rights-based approach involving migrant children themselves.





Children as agents of change

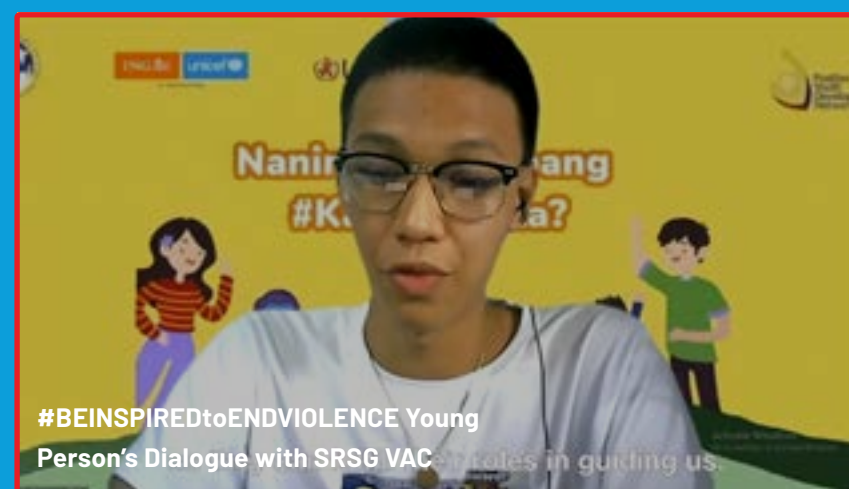
Children are acting as agents of change in efforts to combat violence. Indeed, as seen throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, children are not only taking action to tackle violence – they often lead that action. Children are supporting their communities and peers, connecting with decision makers and reaching other children who are harder to reach. Children have long been engaged in peer-to-peer action and their efforts have intensified since the earliest stages of the pandemic, whether in the form of capacity-building and knowledge transfer, or through the development of peer support networks, as the following examples illustrate.

In Cambodia, children in street situations, working children and children whose parents have migrated connect with other young people and local

authorities to help reduce violence against children through clubs established by the Cambodian Organization for Children and Development that help children to build their capacities in child rights, conflict resolution, violence-free problem solving and data collection and reporting. These same children then educate other children in their communities. In Ghana, children are using drama, poetry and dance to create awareness of the poverty and abuse faced by many children living in the streets, with the support of Catholic Action for Street Children. The aim is to engage communities, church organizations and traditional leaders in the fight against child abuse and neglect. In India, children and adolescents supported by Terre des Hommes are developing arts-based projects to address child abuse, child labour, child marriage, unsafe migration and gender inequality. They advocate in their communities to address negative social norms and collaborate with child protection duty bearers on joint events to raise awareness about violence against children. Children are taught how to report cases of violence or child marriage and how to connect their peers to referrals, helplines and support services.

The Tremendas México network, led by adolescent girls, focuses on tackling gender-based violence and child labour by educating and empowering girls in school from a young age. Its activities include training programmes for girls and boys on health and well-being, such as “Health is Life”, which educates adolescents on mental, sexual and reproductive health and addresses gender stereotypes. During the reporting period, the Special Representative connected directly with children on a range of issues, from mental health and peer-to-peer approaches to the efforts of girls, working children

and children who live on the streets in order to address the violence they face. The Special Representative has also participated in child-led intergenerational dialogues, webinars and podcasts on issues such as the increase in violence against children triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of the return to school on the mental health of children after the pandemic-related disruption of their education.



In Latin America and the Caribbean, the Office of the Special Representative supported “Zoom a tus derechos”, a regional contest encouraging children to submit music videos addressing ethnic and racial discrimination. The Office helped to select winning videos, based on children’s creativity and empowering messages. The Office has also engaged with the “Defensoría de la Niñez” in Chile and different CSOs advocating for the meaningful participation of children in the drafting of the new constitution and participated in technical interviews and webinars on the importance and the benefits of children’s participation. Drafters of the constitution have fostered the active participation of children, including those from vulnerable communities to

ensure no one is left behind. For the second year, the Office of the Special Representative continued to support #CovidUnder19, a CSO-led initiative involving more than 30 global partners based on a child-led advocacy and rights-based approach. In 2021, the initiative launched a peer mentoring programme with children who had been through a capacity-building process, mentoring a new cohort of children from different countries to promote child-led advocacy focused on the inclusion of children in national plans to build back better. The Office will continue to identify, amplify and promote the visibility of children’s role as part of the solution to ending violence. The Special Representative will also continue her direct engagement with children as a core part of her mandate.

Children all over the world were increasingly acting as agents of positive change even before the pandemic. However, despite the creation and strengthening of pathways to involve children in decision-making processes by States and other stakeholders at the international, national and local levels, the barriers to their participation and involvement remain considerable. These barriers include cultural and social norms on their right to a voice in the decisions that affect them, as well as their exposure to violence as a direct consequence of their activism. In particular, children without Internet access or from poor and marginalized groups still lack opportunities to express themselves and to be involved in these processes. More must be done to remove these barriers and to provide safe and empowering pathways for children to express themselves and to act as agents of positive change. Children are not just the future, they are the present and must be part of the solution.

Towards better investment in child protection and children's well-being

The urgent need: violence against children has increased and become less visible

Evidence on the links between the COVID-19 pandemic and violence against children reveals a grim picture: after two years of the pandemic violence against children has increased while becoming less visible.

A review of [existing studies](#) has revealed more family violence and more violence-related injuries, yet fewer reports of violence against children. As the violence has increased, normal prevention and response mechanisms – from schools to child protection services – have been disrupted by lockdowns and closures that have left children without vital support networks. These findings mirror [research](#) on the impact of the pandemic on violence against women, highlighting the close connections between the two forms of violence.

A [study](#) published in The Lancet estimates that more than 1.3 million children worldwide lost at least one parent

or custodial grandparent to COVID-19 between 1 March 2020 and 30 April 2021: orphaned children are at serious risk of violence.

COVID-19 has also created an environment that fuels poor mental health, adding to existing concerns about the mental health of an [entire generation of children](#). Their mental well-being has been marred by confinement and isolation, increased stress and anxiety and greater economic hardships. Children themselves are asking for help: they have identified their mental health and well-being as a major concern during their direct engagement with the Special Representative. [Child Helpline International](#) has also indicated that violence and mental health were the main reasons for calls to member helplines, which rose by 25 per cent around the world in 2020. Yet a WHO survey found that mental health services for children and adolescents were among the services most severely disrupted during the pandemic.

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The pandemic has revealed and exacerbated social inequalities that were already affecting the poorest and most vulnerable children. The impact of the pandemic on families that were already poor has been dire, particularly for those with no access to social protection, and it is likely that 142 million more children were pushed into monetary poverty [by the end of 2020](#). Yet, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO) [World Social Protection Report 2020–2022](#), only 26.4 per cent of children worldwide receive any social protection benefits and the average national expenditure on social protection for children is just 1.1 per cent of GDP.

The implications include the increased risk of child marriage, with UNICEF estimating that over [10 million more girls will be at risk](#) of becoming child brides as a result of the pandemic over the next decade. [Analysis by World Vision International](#) of data from countries in four regions reveals close links between child marriage, hunger, education and parental support: all areas affected by the pandemic. The study found that a child who experienced hunger in the four weeks prior to the survey was 60 per cent more likely to be married than a child who did not and that children who were not in school were 3.4 times more likely to be married than those still in the classroom.

Rising poverty and the loss of education are likely to exacerbate the already growing scale of child labour. [According to UNICEF and ILO](#), the number of children engaged in child labour has risen to 160 million worldwide – an increase of 8.4 million children in the past four years – and global progress has stalled for the first time in 20 years. Children already involved in child labour may be working longer hours and in deteriorating

conditions as a result of the pandemic, and many more from vulnerable families may be forced into the worst forms of child labour because of job and income losses. UNICEF and ILO have warned that 9 million additional children worldwide are now at risk of being pushed into child labour by the end of 2022.

[According to UNODC](#), trafficking of children has shifted even further underground since the start of the pandemic, adding to the challenges of estimating its scale and mounting an effective response. There have been increases in domestic child trafficking in some regions and countries, with children increasingly being targeted by traffickers at the local level and online. There is also evidence of growing demand for child sexual exploitation materials, adding to the exploitation of children worldwide.

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Two years of the pandemic have reshaped online risks to children: while face-to-face bullying may have decreased under lockdown, cyberbullying





has increased in some countries and regions, and [research points](#) to growing harassment, hateful language and exploitation online. A recent [threat assessment](#) from the WeProtect Global Alliance found that COVID-19 has created a “perfect storm” of conditions, fuelling a rise in child sexual exploitation and abuse across the globe. At the same time, the pandemic has highlighted the impact of the digital divide, with two-thirds of the world’s school-age children having no access to the Internet at home [according to UNICEF and ITU](#). This limits their visibility, access to learning materials and participation in society; moreover, it deprives them of online services for their protection.

The effects of the pandemic have not been felt evenly across all groups. It has exacerbated existing inequalities and compounded challenges to accessing services, exposing children who were already more marginalized and vulnerable to violence before the pandemic, including

girls, children with disabilities, indigenous children, refugee, displaced and migrant children, children living or working on the streets, children in alternative care and children in detention, to even greater risks.

Humanitarian crises, including those linked to climate change and armed conflict, continue to fuel violence, displacement, and economic devastation. The pandemic has created even greater challenges for access to essential services in emergencies. At the same time, however, there is only limited funding for child protection in emergencies, as stressed in the 2020 [report of the global Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action](#). Despite these severe challenges, the pandemic has shown what can be achieved – and achieved rapidly – through a combination of political will, innovation and adequate resources. Promising [practices to tackle violence against](#)



[children](#) have included the use of virtual platforms to communicate with children and families and deliver services.

Many countries have kept child helplines open, as well as mechanisms to screen and prioritize calls for children at high risk. National networks of psychologists, social workers and probation officers have been reinforced to serve children and families. States also found [innovative ways](#) to ensure the continuity of justice and legal services, including safeguarding access to justice for child victims and witnesses of crimes through, for example, the videoconferencing of court hearings. UNICEF has reported that more than 45,000 children were released from detention during the COVID-19 pandemic, with Governments and detaining authorities in at least 84 countries using alternative measures and/or placing moratoriums on any new

admissions. This is [clear evidence](#) that child-friendly justice solutions can be found and mobilized when there is the will to do so. [According to World Bank data](#), at least \$800 billion was invested in social protection in the first nine months of the pandemic, reaching over 1.1 billion people, or 14 per cent of the world’s population. Cash transfer benefits nearly doubled in comparison to pre-pandemic levels and coverage grew by 240 per cent.

While it is too early to gauge the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children, there are fears that progress on the prevention of violence may have been too fragile to withstand this crisis. Getting back to normal is too narrow an ambition, given that what was normal before the pandemic was failing to deliver progress at the scale and pace required to end violence against children.

Paradigm shift: from siloed approaches to strengthened and integrated systems



What is needed is a transformation to build back better, based on strengthened and fully integrated services for children. The rights case is well-established and well-known: every child has the fundamental right to freedom from violence. This can now be reinforced by evidence of the benefits of investment in integrated services for children and on the economic returns generated by even a modest increase in such investment.

The pandemic has not only reinforced and heightened the urgent need for a paradigm shift to end violence against children, it has also demonstrated that change is possible, that it can happen at speed and that resources can be found if the will is there to find them.

It is time to mount an effective and sustainable global response to the crisis of violence against children, centred on integrated and strengthened social services for children across all relevant sectors, in particular child protection, health, education, justice and social protection, and support to children from their earliest days through to adulthood, including support for their caregivers. This aligns with the [call](#) by the Human Rights Council for States to take all necessary measures to establish holistic child protection systems, including through appropriate budget allocation, and to ensure access to services across all social sectors to address the multiple needs and underlying vulnerabilities of all children without discrimination.

In practice, this means changing siloed ways of working in order to build an integrated, life-cycle approach that reflects the interlinked and indivisible nature of children's rights and the Sustainable Development Goals. It means mainstreaming children's rights into all relevant policies, programmes and practices and changing mindsets, with investment in children positioned both as a legal obligation based on their rights and prioritized as a sound economic strategy.

Such a shift would align with the Secretary-General's [call](#) for a new social contract as part of a global post-pandemic recovery. It would also support progress towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which aims to build just, protective and inclusive societies that keep all children safe from harm, leaving no one behind. It would deliver the vision set out by the Human Rights Council: that equitable,

sustained and broad-based investment in children lays the foundation for a just society, that it is critical for inclusive and sustainable human development and that it delivers benefits to society and the economy at large. Such an approach would also build on the Council's encouragement for States to prioritize children in their budgets and spending as a means to ensure the highest possible return on the limited resources available.

As emphasized in the [2021 World Bank report](#), Investing in Human Capital for a Resilient Recovery: The Role of Public Finance, public finance is vital in building and protecting human capital as countries seek to recover from the pandemic. In its 2021 report, [Financing an inclusive recovery for children: a call to action](#), UNICEF also made the case for prioritizing social sectors in public spending, even in the face of potential economic recession and fiscal challenges resulting from the pandemic.

To address the increase in child poverty caused by COVID-19 and close social protection coverage gaps [ILO recommends](#) that policymakers implement an integrated systems approach, including child benefits and childcare services, the provision of parental leave and access to health care.



Investment to generate a violence prevention dividend

The strong case for investment in children was outlined in recent research commissioned by the Office of the Special Representative, UNICEF and a group of CSOs. The research brought together the most compelling evidence currently available to demonstrate both the costs of violence against children and the benefits accruing from effective investment in its prevention.

The research confirms the high costs of violence against children to society at large. The human toll in terms of young lives lost or damaged beyond repair by violence has been well-documented, but policymakers also need clear evidence of its cost to their economies and the benefits of investment in prevention.

Violence not only results in significant costs to child victims and their families, but also imposes a severe economic strain on government budgets. The health impacts of childhood violence place heavy burdens on national health systems, while the education, social welfare and justice systems must deal with the consequences of violence, child abuse and neglect.

Economies are held back by the lost productivity of adults who experienced violence as children and this erosion of human capital can undermine all other child-focused investments. Violence slows economic development, increases socioeconomic inequality, stifles economic growth and reduces per capita income, resulting in a vicious cycle of violence and poverty.

The global economic costs of violence against children are difficult to estimate but studies show them to be enormous. A 2014 study by the Overseas Development Institute and the ChildFund Alliance estimated the costs to be as high as \$7 trillion, nearly 8 per cent of global gross domestic product (GDP).

National Governments need to take the lead in combating violence against children. This includes providing adequate budgets to fund violence prevention and response programmes. While data on government spending on programmes to prevent and respond to violence against children – and on child protection more generally – are scarce, it is clear that it is low.

The [Global status report on violence against children 2020](#) charts



progress across 155 countries to tackle this violence. The results show that 80 per cent of countries have at least one national action plan to prevent violence against children, but less than 25 per cent of those plans are fully funded. When it comes to implementation, only 11 per cent of prevention programmes and 5 per cent of response services implemented in low-income countries have the support required to reach all children in need, with funding cited as the key constraint.

UNICEF has developed a standardized approach to estimating spending on child protection, as outlined in its [Financial Benchmark for Child Protection manual](#) (2020). In the course of developing the manual, pilot studies conducted in Afghanistan, Côte d'Ivoire, Indonesia and Nigeria confirmed the low level of government spending on child protection, ranging from \$1.27 per child in [Nigeria](#) in 2013–2014 to \$4.18 in Côte d'Ivoire in 2014.

All violence against children is preventable and its economic costs are avoidable. Investing in violence prevention and responding appropriately when it occurs would deliver a range of economic benefits that can be referred to collectively as a violence prevention dividend – a dividend delivering benefits now, into future adult life and for the next generation of children.



Greater investment: essential, feasible and cost-effective

Greater investment in efforts to prevent violence against children is not only essential, it is feasible and even modest increases could have a sizeable impact. A relatively small increase in allocations would significantly improve the scale and availability of child protection services. A study in Nigeria, for example, showed that a reallocation of just 0.1 per cent of total government expenditure to child protection would see total child protection expenditure increase by 63 per cent. In Mongolia an increase in spending on child protection from 0.12 per cent of consolidated government spending in 2017 to 0.264 per cent in 2020 resulted in a 239 per cent increase in spending on child protection.

Budget planning at national and subnational levels should take into consideration the broad range of economic costs and consequences of violence against children across the multiple sectors that bear those costs and should be commensurate with both the costs and the very large potential savings yielded by effective investment in violence prevention.

The positive impacts of non-violence are hierarchical and cumulative throughout the lifecycle, as later neural, physical and developmental attainments build on the strong foundations laid down during a safe, secure and nurturing childhood free from violence. Indeed, investing in the prevention of violence against children represents a public policy initiative that promotes not only equality and social justice but also productivity in the economy and in society at large.

Specifically, interventions to prevent violence against children, in particular those that target children early in life, can have high returns. Research on early childhood development programmes, for example, shows a best case benefit-cost ratio of 1:17 for a programme to increase pre-school enrolment to 50 per cent in low- and middle-income countries. This has been used to motivate increased government spending on early childhood development programmes around the world, all of which stress the need to support positive, non-violent forms of parenting. Similarly, investments in life-skills education and youth information centres to prevent child marriage provide a benefit cost ratio of 1:21. All of these programmes represent sound investments for Governments as part of broader strategies to tackle violence against children.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent development of the vaccine has demonstrated the cost-effectiveness of prevention in dealing with a public health crisis. Investment in integrated preventive services could be viewed as a kind of “vaccine” against the global crisis of violence against children. There are many cost-effective preventive interventions that provide examples of promising practices built on evidence of what works, as the following examples illustrate.

Legislation adopted in Iceland in early 2021 aims to improve the lives of children by integrating services that cater to their needs. The legislation spans three acts. The first sets out a plan to integrate services for children, with services for children classified as basic, targeted and specialized. A coordinator is made available to all children to help them access all basic services. If children

require more support, a case manager is provided to create a support team to meet their needs. The other acts establish two new institutions, the National Agency for Children and Families and the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare. An evaluation of the cost implications of these legislative changes concludes that there will no real change in costs, that the positive effects will be immediate and that there will be a 9.6 per cent per annum return from 2070 onwards.

In 2015, the Government of Mongolia initiated the drafting of the Child Protection Law. To support the process, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection costed the draft law, including the use of information generated in budgeting and implementation planning. The 2015 Childcare Services Law, as well as the Child Protection Law and the Rights of the Child Law, which were adopted in 2016, create a framework for the provision of comprehensive child protection services. Following the enactment of the Child Protection Law, the costing study served as a framework for discussions regarding the level of funding needed to implement the law and a benchmark against which Government's budgets for child protection services were measured. From 2018 onwards, the Government has increased spending on child protection services substantially. This increase in spending on child protection services has laid a firm foundation for strengthening service delivery and achieving better outcomes over the medium term.

The life skills education programme that began in rural Aurangabad, India, and then extended to the city of Pune, provides a one-year course for adolescent girls aged 12–18, who are at a higher risk of child marriage. An evaluation of the programme



found that only 9 per cent of adolescent girls in the programme were married before 18 years old, compared with one third of girls in the [control group](#). Youth information centres in villages in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh regions provide opportunities for young people to engage with each other and learn about issues relating to sexual and reproductive health and rights. In all, the programme established centres catering to almost 47,000 young people. [An evaluation](#) of the programme shows that a control group of girls who did not attend the centres were 10 times more likely to marry in childhood than those who did. A study found that these two programmes generate a combined return on investment of approximately \$17 for every dollar invested.

[Read study](#)

According to [research by IMF](#) on the connection between child marriage and economic growth in emerging and developing countries, reducing child marriage would significantly increase growth: if child marriage were ended today, long-term annual per capita growth in such countries would increase by 1.05 percentage points. [A global synthesis report](#) by the World Bank on the economic impacts of child marriage estimated that ending child marriage could lead to welfare benefits globally of \$566 billion by the year



2030.

In November 2021, the African Child Policy Forum launched [The Economic Case for Investing in Children in Africa](#): Investing in our Common Future to promote increased investment in children, which shows strong evidence of the economic benefits and returns on investment in children and highlights how government policies can drive progress in this area. The report stresses that progress depends on “a complex interaction of multisectoral interventions, involving food security, health, education, livelihoods, social protection, care practices, gender norms, and water and sanitation”. The report strengthens the argument for investment. On education, for example, it cites studies that have shown that if all girls in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia completed secondary education, child marriage could fall by 64 per cent. Investment in an inclusive social and child-sensitive social protection system would help in tackling child poverty in Africa, with cash transfers and school-feeding programmes playing a critical role in the fight against child poverty, hunger and exclusion, which are so often linked to violence.

Bolsa Familia is Brazil's flagship conditional cash transfer social welfare programme. The programme targets families with per capita monthly income below the national poverty line of 140 Brazilian real (R\$), giving them a monthly stipend of R\$32 per vaccinated child who meets a minimum school attendance threshold. Studies have found that the school attendance requirement, coupled with the fact that the size of the stipend is larger than is typically earned by children engaging in labour, has resulted in significant reductions in the

incidence of child labour among recipient families and has delayed youth entry into the labour market by 0.8 years. Other studies of similar programmes find that the conditionalities tied to these cash transfers reduce the impact of economic shocks on children's schooling because they restrict the reliance of households on child labour to buffer against such shocks. Globally, school attendance as a condition for cash transfers generally reduces participation in child labour.

The Government of Tunisia has redirected funds from inefficient fuel subsidies towards social protection for children, following an [analysis](#) done with the support of UNICEF and IMF showing that child grants would be more cost-effective and of greater benefit to poor children, leading to better child outcomes. As part of the COVID-19 response, the Government reduced fuel subsidies and implemented temporary cash-transfer measures, targeting at least 623,000 families with children.

Many other Member States are developing or strengthening integrated national policies and financing frameworks, paying particular attention to children's protection and well-being. The Special Representative will continue to gather and share these practices with Member States.



Looking ahead

Violence against children is a pandemic that undermines the realization of their rights and the prospects of achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It is a pandemic that was blighting the lives of millions of children long before COVID-19, and that has only been exacerbated by the two years of restrictions and lockdowns imposed during the pandemic and the resulting disruption of essential services for children. Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing crises caused by conflict, food insecurity, climate change, natural disasters and political instability also continue to expose children to multiple forms of violence.

Ending violence against children cannot wait. With only eight years remaining to keep the promise of the 2030 Agenda, building back better during the pandemic and beyond must be seen as an opportunity that cannot be missed in order to prevent and to end violence against children in all settings.

Investment in integrated preventive services should be viewed as a kind of “vaccine” against the pandemic of violence against children. Integrated services for children and families are not only the foundation for global efforts to build back better in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, they are also vital for the creation of just and resilient societies that can withstand shocks in the future.

Spending on integrated services must be seen as an investment, despite the fiscal constraints created by the



pandemic. These are not just additional costs: they provide a strong return for children, families and societies at large. The investment case for integrated services has been strengthened by research on their impact across a wide range of countries, in addition to the growing body of evidence on the efficacy of violence prevention and response initiatives more broadly.

The case for investment calls for strong political will, supported by sufficient financial resources, well-staffed services, evidence-based action, strong information and monitoring systems and robust accountability mechanisms.

This requires wide and sustainable mobilization and multistakeholder partnerships, linking global, regional, national and local levels, involving all actors, including national and local governments, CSOs and faith-based organizations, religious leaders, the private sector, the United Nations system, financial institutions, media and tech companies, local communities, donors and children and young people. As current and future agents of change, children must be part of the solution.



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