

STATEMENT BY MARTA SANTOS PAIS



Statement by Marta Santos Pais, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on Violence against Children, during the international colloquium Extreme poverty is violence – Breaking the silence – Searching for peace on January 26, 2012.

Dear friends,

It is a real privilege to participate in this important colloquium.

My collaboration with ATD Fourth World goes back many years and I feel deeply inspired for joining hands again today, and for the opportunity of sharing my work, and supporting our common cause, with the knowledge and experience of experts, academics and practitioners, and most importantly, in strong partnership with those living in extremely poor communities around the world.

Today's meeting marks the culmination of a unique process of research and search for a process of lasting change, and it launches a platform to build a world of solidarity, mutual respect and peace, where violence and poverty have no place.

As a young person has told us in a meeting held last year in New York, "extreme poverty is a form of violence itself, as it creates an environment in which children and their families need to defend their rights daily."

Poverty and marginalization strip children of their safety and dignity, and compromise their physical and emotional well-being.

Humiliation, bullying and ill-treatment, stigmatization and exploitation are components of their daily scenario.

As they often say, "because of extreme poverty, violence sticks to our life and torments our spirit."

I am just returning from a long mission in Asia, where I had the opportunity of meeting and learning from the experience, fears and expectations of children living in extreme poverty, many of whom in unsafe and neglected urban areas, where violence is a constant risk.

As they have highlighted, their life is surrounded by social indifference and remains deeply invisible. They feel voiceless and without influence, and they become easy targets of situations of abuse and exploitation, including child labour and trafficking.

When authorities intervene, children risk being arrested and harassed by the police or welfare services – for begging, for vagrancy and other survival behaviours. Placed in overcrowded care institutions or detention centres, they are further victimized, beaten, humiliated and ill-treated, including when they are shaved to prevent any attempt to run away, and to enable being easily identified and re-captured.

For these children, information about their rights and ways of being protected from violence are simply non-existent, non-accessible and certainly rarely used.

Violence and poverty are closely inter-connected and compromise children's fundamental rights. Both generate a strong sense of exclusion, low self-esteem and at times aggressive behavior. As children grow older, poverty and violence have a cumulative impact on their development, leading to poor health, poor school performance and long-term welfare dependency.

More importantly, both are a denial of children's human dignity and potential to participate in social progress and promote a just and cohesive environment on an equal footing with other members of society.

Extreme poverty, social exclusion and violence remain unacceptably invisible in today's world, leading to social indifference and inaction.

And yet, ending poverty has been identified as a priority in the international agenda ; and children's protection from violence as a human rights imperative. It is time to move from these important commitments into tangible action.

The process promoted by ATD Fourth World has been crucial to break the silence and invisibility of violence surrounding the life of those in extreme poverty and deprivation, and to consolidate the knowledge about their living conditions, aspirations and significant initiatives, in a process of partnership and mutual learning, a process of constant search for a worldwide commitment to reverse the patterns of exclusion and violence that has shaped their lives, and to build a world of peace and social justice.

Today's process of dialogue, learning and social demand has been ground breaking and enriching, and it has strengthened our shared sense of deep impatience, and deep felt call for urgent action !

Each of us can make a difference and this is a task no one can postpone !

This is why in my mandate I remain decisively committed to continuing to join hands with children and young people in extreme poverty, so that their voice can be heard and influence lasting change in each and every country of the world.

This is also why I remain determined to working together with you in enhancing the accountability of governments for the elimination of violence and extreme poverty and for a paradigm shift in the way the human dignity of all members of the human family is given the decisive attention it requires. I look forward to joining hands with you in the steps ahead.

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