

Stop violence and crimes against children

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Violence against children affects at least 1.6 billion children around the world every year [1]. Any adverse childhood experiences may represent potentially traumatic events with negative long-lasting impacts on the psycho-physical health and well-being of children [2]. Children experience violence in many ways, including homicide, physical punishment and bullying, forced sex, intimate partner violence and witnessing domestic violence [3].

The United Nations (UN) Convention on the 'Rights of the Child' took effect on September 7, 1990 [4]. Of the 195 member states, 192 signed this Convention: only the United States (US), Somalia and South Soudan have not ratified it. According to the Convention, governments "*have a responsibility to take all available measures to make sure children's rights are respected, protected and fulfilled*" (Article 4); moreover, they "*should ensure that children sur-*

vive and develop healthy" (Article 6), "*protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse*" (Article 34) and take all possible measures to "*make sure that children are not abducted, sold or trafficked*" (Article 35). In addition, children deprived of a family environment have a "*right to special care and must be looked after by people who respect their ethnic group, religion, culture and language*" (Article 20). Refugee children have the right to special protections and help (Article 22). Children "*should not be put in prison with adults, should be able to keep in contact with their families, and should not be sentenced to death or life imprisonment without possibility of release*" (Article 37). Finally, the Convention states that "*governments must do everything they can to protect and care for children affected by war*" (Article 38). Today, only a few countries across the globe are actually free from conflict [5]. New weapons and patterns of conflict that include delib-

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erate attacks against civilians are increasingly turning children into primary targets of war. The UN General Assembly and the Committee on the Rights of the Child asked Graça Machel to study the impact of armed conflict on children. In her report, Machel stated that “*armed conflict kills and maims more children than soldiers*” [6]. As Joanna Santa Barbara showed [7], the impact of war on children is almost always devastating: its impacts include death, injury, disability, illness, rape and prostitution for subsistence, psychological suffering, moral and spiritual impacts, social and cultural losses and the conscription of child soldiers: that study called for health professionals to consider was as ‘a serious global public health’ issue that must be promptly tackled and ended.

However, although governments’ role in defending children’s rights is essential, governments that signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are engaged in wars, killing children, and making choices contrary to the tenets upheld by the Convention they signed. For instance, the Syrian civil war that began in 2011 has displaced nearly 12 million people; children under the age of 18 represent about half of the Syrian refugee population, with approximately 40% under the age of 12. The rate of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among Syrian refugee children is so high as to be comparable to that observed among children who experienced wars [8]. Even in a civilized country, such the US, the media has reported that, from mid-April to May 2018, nearly 2,000 children were separated from their parents as a consequence of President Trump’s zero-tolerance immigration policy because their families had illegally crossed the border between that country and Mexico. US paediatricians have defined this policy as ‘child abuse’ with potential short-term and long-term psychological consequences for children [9].

Abortion is another widely accepted form of violence that is practiced in most developed and developing countries. Abortion affects the most vulnerable human beings. Recently, Pope Francis made a comparison between

Nazi eugenics programmes in an attempt to eradicate people with physical or cognitive disabilities and prenatal tests associated with abortion when a foetus is affected by illnesses or deformities [10]. Abortion cannot be used as a weapon of discrimination against the disabled or people whose ethnicity or race differs from the dominate population. Moreover, all over the world children who are refugees are experiencing violence. European leaders have failed to reach an agreement on the immigration crisis. Thus, there are no safe, legal routes for families to escape from the conflicts and disasters that are affecting their homelands. Consequently, many refugee children have been separated from their families, and left “*with no other options other than to rely on smugglers, who often take advantage of their desperate situation*” [11]. Many of these children have known deprivation and war, and they are dying while they are calling for help. Children who have survived these dire circumstances report that the violence they have experienced has impacted their physical and psychological well-being, increasing their risks for illness, unwanted pregnancy, psychological distress, stigma, discrimination and difficulties at school. In this issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Sciences*, we present a systematic review of the suspected cases of sexual violence presented at hospitals in Nigeria, which is an African country where the selling of children to people in European and other western countries is a common and criminal practice. Akin-Odanye showed that the rate of sexual abuse is much higher in children than it is in adults [12].

In conclusion, these days violence against children is widespread in both developed and developing countries. By perpetrating violence against children, we are building a society without human values. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), health, economic, educational and social policies that maintain economic, gender and social inequalities, as well as post-conflict situations and weak governance, are important risk factors at the societal level [13]. Probably, the cultural differences and economic inequality

between developed and developing countries are the breeding ground for this phenomenon. Children are the purest part of humanity, and violence against them breaches the values of every religion. In a society where materialism reigns and the concept of health is devoid of spirituality, human beings become sick and the Earth suffers. Violence against children impacts their current opportunities and

affects the well-being of future generations. Therefore, it is urgent to stop violence against children in order to build a better world for all of us.

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