



## INTERNATIONAL GIRL CHILD CONFERENCE

9-10 MARCH 2009, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS

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It was noted that 125+ participants, in addition to those from the Netherlands, representing approximately fifty countries were present at this well planned stimulating International Girl Child Conference. It was organized by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in cooperation with the Ministry for Youth and Families, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, and UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

To provide a partial context, the following information was presented:

### **Girls are especially vulnerable to all forms of violence**

- Every year, millions of girls are killed shortly after birth simply because their families are unable to pay for their upbringing and dowry
- Often, girls do not go to school but are made to contribute to the household budget
- Girls are more likely than boys to be sold or married off at a young age
- Where money is available for health care, it is often spent on boys rather than girls

Rationale for the conference:

- In 2007 the Dutch government adopted a human rights strategy for foreign policy in which the rights of the child were identified as top priority. It was noted that the more vulnerable persons are, the more important that they be aware of their rights, and be able to seek help in asserting them. This applies to children in particular.
- The Netherlands is seeking to promote action to end violence against girls.

Conference Theme: Violence against Girls in the Home and Family Setting

- The UN Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children by Professor Sergio Pinheiro was a reference for discussion. Dr. Pinheiro addressed the group.
- The key actor, in my opinion, in organizing this event was Minister of Foreign Affairs, MAXIME VERHAGEN. One of his several quotations that resonate with me included: "children, girls in particular, are the most vulnerable members of our society; they therefore especially need support to achieve their rights..."

Architecture of the Conference included:

- Speeches, Plenary Sessions, Panel Presentations, Workshops, Documentary Films, Exhibitions, (Structured) Opportunities for Networking

Significant comments from MINISTER VERHAGEN included the following: **(He) promised to put human rights at the centre of Dutch Foreign Policy... The rights of the child occupy a special place, because children are so vulnerable.**

The "poster child" for the conference was ten year old Nujood Mohammed Ali. Nujood took the situation into her own hands, went to court, filed for divorce - at age ten - from her husband - twenty years her senior - who had abused and raped her. She has returned to school, aspires to become a lawyer. She has been greatly **empowered**, in part, because of her determination, courage, action

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and events. Reportedly, she is playing with dolls again. The (Yemeni) Parliament has put forth a bill that sets 17 to be the minimum age for marriage; the bill is awaiting signature of the Prime Minister. Violence against Girls (VAG) takes many different forms – sometimes it is open and institutionalized: Some examples cited are as follows:

- Girls are prevented from attending school (Taliban in Afghanistan/Pakistan)
- The rape of girls/women can be used as a weapon of war (DRC)
- Girls are forced to work in the most appalling circumstances: sweatshops, domestic workers and sex slaves (Haiti)
- Girls are victims of trafficking; trafficking knows no borders
- Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting – FGM/C -- of girls represents mutilation for life
- Forced Early Marriage or Child Brides - FEM
- Honor Crime – girls made to pay, often with their lives, to safeguard the honor of the family
- Incest
- Internet –pornography, child abuse

It was further stated that neither FGM nor Honor Killing has anything to do with religion; rather, these are traditional customs which **epitomize the inferior role girls are accorded in society.**

Marta Santos Pais, Director UNICEF Innocenti Research Center, informed the audience of IRC's support and follow-up on the UN Study on Violence. She continued by saying that this (Hague) Conference can provide an opportunity to address different forms of VAG (understand root causes, assess potential for change and anticipate more effective ways to prevent its occurrence). She identified Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as a sound (international) normative foundation; has been developed to promote the realization of children's rights and to protect girls from all forms of violence. The general principle of the CRC has helped shape a new vision of childhood and has influenced the way we frame law and policy to safeguard the fundamental rights of children.

Minister VERHAGEN commented that the **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)** is very clear; violence is a violation of the rights of the child, **(violence) is unacceptable, whatever the circumstances.**

Minister VERHAGEN has undertaken an effort to safeguard the rights of women and children all over the world and advance the issue "up" the political agenda.

Minister VERHAGEN stated that he is committed to find out how best to change words into deeds. A contribution of 700,000 Euros was made by the Netherlands for the purpose of establishing a database within the United Nations (New York) containing information on VAW, and examples from all over the world of best practices in tackling it. This was formalized on 5 March 2009 with the UN Mission of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro **\*\*ACTION REQUESTED\*\***: Minister of Foreign Affairs MAXIME VERHAGEN urges that we all **advocate for the timely appointment of a Special Rapporteur for VAC**, the original request was included in Professor Pinheiro's Report, 2006.

His ending comment was a quotation from the former Secretary-General, Kofi Annan: **No violence against children is justifiable; all violence against children is preventable.**

Respectfully submitted,

CATHERINE E. MOORE