

Violence against Children and care expert consultation - Opening address

It is very gratifying to look around and see so many people here today. Your presence here represents a promise to what I know will be a great conference. Today, I would like to remind us all, during all of the presentations, the discussions during tea break and the things we plan, that we remind ourselves who we are doing this for.

We are here today on behalf of Africa's children—especially those that have survived violence against children, those that are in alternative care, and those like me, who have lived through violence, through residential care and have left care. As we seek to address Violence against Children it is critical we understand its intensity, nature and repercussions and that we understand this through the lens of children or young adults like me who have experienced this directly.

I stand before you today to bring to light the experience of children who should not spend a lifetime trying to forget a few minutes of their childhood.

Today I wanted to share a little bit of my own story to shed light on how VAC and Care are so intertwined and why we must address both if we want to do better for children. Growing up as a child wasn't easy for me. At a tender age I witnessed violence happen in our very own home. My father would come late at night and quarrel over nothing and everything. I cannot count the number of times mum cried from being battered. She would cry and make statements like, 'the day you wake up and find me gone, just walk up the hill to your grand mum's.' We would all cry helplessly not knowing who to turn to or what to say to her.

Today I see children run to hug their daddy after work and what comes to my mind is how my siblings and I would act at the sight of my dad. My sister would pick books and pretend to do assignments. I would look for anything to do even if it meant redoing clean dishes just to avoid any engagement with him. The earliest he would show up was 9pm. A few minutes to 9 pm we would all coil up in fear of the unknown. Countless times he threatened to kill mum who later scampered for safety to an unknown destination for a number of years. We needed care, we needed love. We needed safety.

Landing in an orphanage seemed the greatest transition in my life. We would never have to fear every time 9pm approached. Nothing ever felt as safe as this, only to realize later, the book never changed, the topic did. On many occasions there was not enough food for all of the children. Food would run out when we were barely half the queue. The rest would sleep hungry and wait for the next day. There are times when all we had for lunch was a carrot per child. We did not have classes; we had rooms

that doubled up as dormitories and classrooms. When morning came we would gather mattresses in one corner and sit on the floor for lessons. There were only a few desks and chairs available. The majority would sit on the floor and place the books on the laps while writing. The living conditions were deplorable.

If no one had acted to improve my situation, I could still be mingling with rats which was the order of the day, scabies on me and so much more. Believe me, as someone who has survived violence, it never leaves you the same. The repercussions are grave and damaging. However, I am not what I went through: I am the courage that escaped, the spark that lit the fire as so many child survivors are.

The World Health Organization's definition of violence is all forms of physical or emotional ill treatment, sexual abuse, neglect resulting to actual or potential harm to a child's health, survival, development or dignity. A report received by UNICEF shows every 5 minutes a child dies from violence.

Think of this, as we sit here today, a child has been defiled by a stranger. Another one is being bullied by a school prefect. One has been abandoned to the mysteries of the streets, a girl somewhere in Maasai land is going through FGM. These children could be your sister, your brother, your grandchild, your niece or nephew and if not your relatives, they are your fellow human beings entitled to human rights. Distinguished child protection professionals and stakeholders, Children's rights are human rights!

It is one thing to have a problem and another thing to know there is a problem and not do anything about it. Some may think it is none of their business but trust me, violence against children and care is all our business. All of us here today can and should make a change. We must make a change. What can we as individuals, as organizations, as child rights based institutions do to bring about this change? Let's be determined in our effort to be the change.

I finish by quoting "People ask, how can a person abuse a child?" I ask, 'how can so many good people like you do nothing about it?'"

Thank you