

**PARTICIPANTS ADDRESS AT THE MEDIA CONFERENCE ENTITLED "RESTORING DIGNITY
ORGANIZED BY INTERNATIONS' JUSTICE FEDERATION**

Venue: Pier 21, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

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The founder Internations' Justice Federation.

The President of the Law Commission of Canada

Our Friend in the Media

Distinguish Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen.

It gives me a great deal of joy to have been invited to this media conference entitled RESTORING DIGNITY. You have made me very welcome and I hope that we will all enjoy this learning and exchange of information and that the benefits will be felt by children throughout the world. I also want to use this opportunity to thank the organizers for their efforts to make this event a reality. Thanks

INTRODUCTION

Liberty 4 Africa (L4A) is a Nigerian based, non government organization. It is an international, non - profitable, highly ethical, result - focused organization with activism focused on Child Protection and Abuse, Youth Development and thirdly, we focus on Health Issues – working to curb the spread of deadly disease in our society with emphasis on an awareness program of HIV/AIDS – important, as Nigeria currently ranks fourth as the nation with the highest HIV infections in the world.

With our track record, (L4A) has been able to develop a training module, "child domestic violence" which highlights degrading traditional practices, child torture, child marriage, and introduces a proper screening mechanism advocating better laws which criminalizes all forms of child neglect.

Nigeria is a young democracy with a population of 123.9 million (1999) which is multi-ethnic and multi-religious. Close to 50 % of the population live in urban areas. Adult literacy rate is 55.6 %. Life expectancy at birth is estimated at 52 years, and could be drastically reduced if HIV/AIDS is not contained.

Nigeria is an oil-producing nation with an external debt of US\$ 31.6 billion. 65 % of the population lives below the national poverty line. Religious and ethnic conflicts have, in recent times, caused disruption in governance in several parts of the country and have at times brought the country to the brink of Civil War, which is still a future possibility.

About 5,000 out of every 100,000 Nigerian babies die annually at birth – this is currently one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world.

In Africa, an estimated 250 million children are engaged in some form of labor. Mention should also made of the 600 million children living in absolute poverty. We must consider the 13 million who have lost at least one parent to AIDS.

We all want to imagine a world in which every child is truly and deeply wanted; is truly loved and is blessed with caring, loving parents who have a sincere desire to provide the best possible guidance and protection for their children.

Imagine a world where every child is both physically and mentally healthy, where street children are no where to be found, and where children are no longer robbed of childhood by the economic need to work!

It is very sad that in common with other developing lands, Nigeria has really suffered the catastrophic effects of child abuse and those children's problems are not limited in their scope. Africa as a continent has suffered all forms of child abuse, such as child labor, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and child trafficking.

There have been many cases of Nigerian girls being trafficked to Europe, especially Italy, to facilitate the sex trade there, all in the hope of escaping the harsh economic conditions they face in Nigeria. Many of these girls come within the United Nations definition of a child. Also, recent British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reports revealed that many children of West African parentage, particularly Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire, are being held captive in the United Kingdom over debts owed by their parents to gangs which had helped them cross over to Europe in search of greener pastures. While most of these children are used for child labor, it will not be surprising to find that some of them have been subjected to some form of sexual exploitation.

One of the more modern forms of child abuse, particularly prevalent in South Africa is the rape of babies. This is often instigated by a common myth held in some African countries, that sexual intercourse with an infant or a virgin not only cures AIDS but also cures infertility. With the alarming rate at which HIV/AIDS has spread on the African continent, there is a threat of this myth leading to more cases of infant and child rape in Africa, Nigeria inclusive.

Child labor is responsible for 80% of all forms of child neglect in Nigeria. The type of work involves the domestic servant, child beggars, street hawking, commercial sexual exploitation, and industrial and agricultural child labor. The most prevalent being domestic servants and street hawkers. Child laborers are subjected to a heavy work load with little or no pay. They are deprived of affection, schooling and leisure. In addition they are also vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse.

Studies have traced trafficking routes and identified some countries as mainly suppliers or receivers. Nigeria is both a supplier and receiver in child trafficking.

Nigeria seems to be particularly affected by the phenomenon: 1,178 women and children are reported to have been trafficked between March 1999 and December 2000. Most of the children are sold by their parents for between \$14 and \$40 each. Some of the agents say they manage to find work for as many as 150 children a year. One Nigerian network makes between \$10,000 and \$12,000 for smuggling a child into New York, U.S. immigration officials report.

The total value of this worldwide trade in children is hard to estimate. But experts say it is one of the most profitable forms of organized trans-national crime after drugs, illegal gambling and prostitution.

From Nepal to Nigeria to Brazil, the methods are the same. Traffickers win the confidence of the parents with a small amount of money or clothes and the children are then entrusted to them. The recruiters promise to look after the children and find them a job

that will help raise the standard of living of the whole family. Trafficking in children arises from poverty, the decline of the extended family, lack of education for the children and of other sources of income for the family.

But the illicit trade is also a result of how some societies regard children. The parents themselves are often responsible for the enslavement of their children, seeing them as an investment and hoping they will be able to make some contribution to the family income, either in cash or in kind. This view creates fertile ground for child labor and trafficking to develop.

Child labor is of course a direct infringement on the rights of the child. It could be stopped through compulsory education, which the child would be entitled to as a 'human right' irrespective of the parents' economic status.

It is important to note the preponderance of street children in African countries and the child soldier phenomenon.

In Nigeria, as in other parts of the world, as the child victims of institutional physical and sexual abuse reach adulthood and are empowered to find their public voice, the question of how to respond has become a concern for the Nigerian Federal Government, as well as to local government, international organizations, various religious and other organizations. The complex nature of the problem and the extent of the harm caused to children, contributes to the difficulty of finding appropriate responses.

The traditional legal responses – civil actions and criminal prosecutions – seem inadequate to address the far-ranging consequences of institutional physical and sexual child abuse. The only effective process that can alleviate the social consequences of the abuse of the child, who is growing into adulthood, will be the introduction of appropriate welfare structures into the Nigerian community. This will bring about a paradigm shift in our perception of support of children who have been subjected to abuse. For the first time the traditional support mechanism of the extended African family will be underpinned by support from a welfare system. This will include organized counseling, moral and developmental support.

Early attempts to restore the right of the child were given an impetus when in 1989. Poland introduced the United Nations Draft convention on the Rights Of The Child at the United Nations General Assembly. Poland's efforts were motivated by her own tragic experience as a result of which, she did not want the children of other nations to suffer the same fate as her own children had suffered.

The draft convention included in it, the rights of the child to go to school and have access to good health. It also included the right of the child to a name, a nationality, the right to survive, to develop and to be protected from abuse and neglect as well as to be allowed to participate in the life of society.

In 1992 Nigeria ratified the UN Convention Of The Rights Of The Child and through the Federal Ministry of Women's Affairs and Youth Development, in conjunction with UNICEF and some Non-Governmental Organizations, a draft bill was produced under the leadership of Prof Adeyemi of the University of Lagos.

But since 1992 when the draft bill was produced, subsequent governments have not had the political will power to pass it into law and the Nigerian child continues to suffer silently as they wait for you and for me to work on their behalf and to turn the tide.

We would of course all agree that the prevention of abuse, exploitation and commercial use of children is fundamental to their dignity as human beings.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child refers to 'dignity' seven times and it is a concept that clearly permeates the document. Nevertheless, 'dignity' as a concept is not of itself clearly defined. A former Special Report to the United Nations on 'Human Sale and Traffic' points out that 'in the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the word 'dignity' comes before 'rights'. This means that human dignity is the foundation and justification of all the rights defined later in the Declaration' (Fernand Laurent, 1992, p. 36).

The Declaration of Human Rights holds as a fundamental principle respect for human dignity and safeguards in particular the dignity of women and the 'innocence of children' . This highlights the difference between the dignity of adults and that of children whose dignity can be said to rest in their innocence.

CONCLUSION

I have outlined the following target actions that I would encourage individuals, foundations, governments, local and international organizations to consider.

To ensure a better opportunity for the African Child, governments must take immediate and effective action to prohibit and eliminate the worst forms of child labor for all those under 18 years of age, which corresponds to the general definition of 'child' in the United Nations Convention On The Rights Of A Child.

The Public, Private and Charity Sectors in Nigeria should acknowledge their responsibility for acts of abuse against children, and offer individual and group apologies, as appropriate, and grant monetary and non-monetary compensation to these individuals affected based on their circumstances of poverty and deprivation.

Society and governments in particular, must continue to investigate the instances of abuse committed in institutions for children. And bring to trial the perpetrators of the abuse.

Government bodies that have the responsibility of providing shelter, food, and an education to children must instigate procedures and structures that ensure that children cannot be subjected to cruel, degrading, and personally invasive behavior.

The Right to Education must not only be implemented, but also enforced. This will ensure that children who live in conditions of economic deprivation are enabled to attend school when they are removed from the trap of working to support their families income.

Encourage generous financial support of United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), who are working to safeguard human dignity, welfare and security in developing countries.

Finally, let us continue our effort by alleviating the poverty that drives the child abuse market in developing countries. And seal into societies the moral and ethical conscience that prevents people from indulging in the abuse of children. And in doing so, we will also retrieve the magic of childhood for those innocent victims of abuse and exploitation.

“What is the faith of Africa in the 21 century when war, AIDS, poverty and malnutrition continue to drive African dreams to an early grave? When will my people be liberated? My mission is that Africans gain liberty from poverty, health hazards and have a productive future. My vision is to unite Africans as one and bring peace to my mother land”. - Ceo/founder Liberty 4 Africa

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND ATTENTION.