



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at a meeting with the National Council on Combating
Sexual Violence against Children and Young People
at Schloss Bellevue
on 30 June 2021**

Whenever you hear reports about sexual violence against children and young people these days, they are generally referring to crimes committed in church institutions, particularly institutions of the Roman Catholic Church. And it is good and important that we keep talking about this, because we know that these crimes were long forgotten or covered up by the churches, and uncovering, investigating and prosecuting them is taking an agonisingly long time. However, we must not forget that sexual abuse has taken place, and continues to take place, in state and social institutions, too. Nor must we forget that children and young people are most often subject to sexual abuse within their immediate family, by extended family and friends, or in their day-to-day online activity.

The appalling cases of child abuse in Staufen, Lügde, Bergisch-Gladbach and Münster shocked and alarmed many people in our country. But we must all be aware that the cases widely publicised in the media reveal but a fraction of an abyss of violence that cuts through the whole of society. Every year, thousands of children and young people in our country become victims of sexual abuse, not in some far-flung place, but most often close by, right in our midst.

We must not hide or downplay this frightening reality. Above all, we must not accept it. It is not enough merely to react, to express sadness and outrage when particularly drastic crimes hit the headlines. The fight against sexual violence against children and young people is a moral and political obligation; both government and society bear a responsibility. It is a matter of protecting boys and girls everywhere and of preventing attacks. It is a matter of uncovering and stopping abuse as quickly as possible. And it is a matter of helping those who have suffered sexual violence and of recognising their suffering.

Considerable progress has been made at political level and in society in the past few years, not least thanks to those affected who have found the courage and the strength to break their silence. Their engagement has been crucial in ending the taboo and putting the issue on the agenda. Despite all efforts, however, it has not yet been possible to reduce the unimaginable scale of sexual abuse of children and young people. On the contrary: the number of depictions of abuse on the internet is exploding; the digital media act like accelerants.

We still know too little about the frequency of abuse, about the perpetrators and the contexts. Girls and boys who are subjected to sexual violence still go unnoticed in their immediate environment or – even worse – are intimidated and forced to stay silent. Victims are injured for a second time, left alone in order to protect perpetrators. This is the bitter truth. There are still institutions which are slow to investigate. And there are still victims who receive no help.

That is why we must do more. And we must promote dialogue and cooperation. What we need is for the many forces engaged in the fight against sexual violence to work together, not in competition with each other. And it is precisely in this respect that the National Council sets a good example. It brings together government, society, academia, professionals in the field and those affected; it pools energy, knowledge and experience. Members of the National Council, I am delighted to welcome you this morning – some of you here in the room, others via video call, and many others watching on their screens. Wherever you are, it is great to have you with us.

I am glad that we will shortly have the opportunity to discuss the ideas and proposals you presented to the public this morning. And I hope that together we can make it clear that the fight against sexual violence is a task for us all, for each and every one of us. In all sections of society, we need more sensitivity, more awareness, a greater willingness to act responsibly. We need courage and integrity. We need a culture of watchfulness in our country.

This means that we need to be aware of the scope and scale of sexual violence in our society today. Last year alone, the investigatory agencies recorded over 14,500 cases of child abuse. There are doubtless many more cases that have gone unreported. It is estimated that there are a million young people in Germany who are or have been exposed to sexual violence.

Sexual violence is frequently made possible by relationships of authority or dependence; such power or dependence also makes it incredibly difficult for victims to break away from perpetrators and to confide in others. We need constantly to remind ourselves that the majority of instances of abuse occur within the family, within the family's wider circle or in the local neighbourhood, and that sexual abuse occurs in all parts of society. The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us once

again very forcefully how many girls and boys are exposed to danger in their own homes.

We also know that there still exist structures that make sexual violence possible and facilitate abuse, and they exist in many places – in church and state institutions, in educational establishments, in sports clubs, choirs and orchestras. Closed institutions, all-male circles, opaque hierarchical structures, misplaced loyalty that covers up crimes to protect the institution's reputation – all these are far from being things of the past.

Not least, sexual violence and exploitation have taken on unimaginable dimensions in the digital media. Depictions of abuse are disseminated millions of times over, not only on the dark web, but often via digital services we all use every day. Indeed, over the year of the pandemic, the dissemination and consumption of such images and films has even seen a sharp increase. We must be aware that victims suffer terribly when their image circulates on the net, frequently remaining there for ever.

The spread of digital technology has produced new and particularly abhorrent forms of abuse, such as livestreaming via webcam from children's bedrooms. And it offers perpetrators new ways to contact children and young people, to manipulate them unseen, to exploit their need for love and recognition. The perpetrators are always there, via smartphone, never giving their victims a break, sitting unnoticed alongside them as the family eats dinner.

A culture of watchfulness also means having sympathy for the suffering of those who experienced or are experiencing sexual violence in childhood and adolescence.

There are still people in our country who close their eyes to the pain and suffering of the victims, who downplay or trivialise sexual abuse. There are still people who say boys and girls bear a share of the blame for crimes for which the perpetrators alone are responsible. "But she kept on writing to him." Sentences like this reflect a fatal tendency to put the blame on precisely the wrong person.

In this society we must realise at long last that children and young people who suffer sexual violence are severely injured both physically and mentally; they suffer existential distress that can overshadow whole lifetimes. One victim put it thus: "Living with an experience like that means wrangling with yourself every day, asking yourself whether you still want to live this life, whether you have the strength to behave as though you were a completely normal person."

To be hurt by a person who is supposed to love, protect and support us, to be let down, betrayed and abandoned; to have lost the feeling of being safe and valued and not to be able to confide in anyone because the perpetrator is a close relative or an authority figure – father,

mother, priest, teacher or coach; not to be able to speak out for fear of losing one's family or friends, because what you have experienced is unspeakable, terrible and destructive, because you are paralysed by fear, powerlessness, shame, disgust and self-hatred – these are all traumatic, profoundly disturbing and destructive experiences.

Many victims are wounded, despairing, lonely, sad and frightened; some are robbed for ever of their ability to trust others and build new relationships – relationships which they actually urgently need to help heal their wounds. Many are injured for a second time when their suffering is not subsequently recognised, when no one will listen to them or believe them, when they are treated like supplicants, when they are ignored, marginalised or stigmatised.

Those who have been subjected to sexual violence as a child or adolescent often find it difficult as an adult to build a family or a career. No small number of victims live in precarious conditions, and more than a few have to keep forcing themselves to manage day-to-day tasks. They deserve our respect for their achievements in building up a new life in the wake of the violence they experienced. And they deserve our help; they have a right to it.

I wish we in this country would stand united by the side of the many people who have suffered sexual violence in childhood and adolescence. Let us turn towards them, let us empathise with their pain. Let us not leave them alone in their suffering and despair!

A culture of watchfulness means not least that we, in government and institutions, in families and throughout society, must acknowledge our responsibility to protect children and young people from sexual violence, to quickly identify abuse in instances where we could not prevent it, and to help victims promptly.

Unfortunately, each and every one of us must be open to the possibility that children and young people in our own environment are suffering sexual violence – in families, among friends, in nurseries, schools or clubs. Every day, we must all be watchful, listen out, and ask questions. We must take children and young people seriously and be ready to believe them. And we must intervene and help as soon as there is the least indication or suspicion. That is why education and awareness-raising are especially important; they help not least to prevent specific groups from being generally suspected of being perpetrators. It is a matter of ensuring a climate of care and responsibility, not of suspicion and mistrust.

In the Joint Understanding, a comment by the Council of Victims and Survivors states: "One of our key life experiences as now-adult survivors is that no adults ever asked us whether anything was wrong, what happened, or why we appeared so quiet, sad, aggressive, conspicuously over-adapted, apparently crazy, odd, difficult, outlandish

or ill. Being asked might have made all the difference to us." We should all take that to heart!

Being watchful, asking questions, talking openly, intervening if necessary – these all apply especially when it comes to the dangers on the internet. We must teach children and young people – and parents and teachers – better about perpetrators' strategies. We must make sure that young people realise that sending depictions of abuse is not a trivial matter. And, not least, there must be even more of an obligation on platform operators to cooperate with the authorities.

I am grateful for the National Council's particular commitment to establishing protection plans in all institutions. Facilities where children are looked after must not become places where crimes are committed; we must make them places where boys and girls can find help at an early stage. We must ensure that children's well-being always has priority over protecting the institution. In general, the earlier the intervention, the earlier the abuse is stopped and the victims receive help, the better their chances of overcoming what has happened.

Further, we must continue to investigate and prosecute crimes committed in institutions years ago. We must name the perpetrators and end the hushing-up of abuse. And we must encourage survivors to tell their stories and demand that their suffering be recognised. The aim is to break the silence, the silence that is the strongest protection for the perpetrators and the continuation of the victims' suffering.

There is also a need to improve the range of support services for survivors and their families, particularly in youth welfare offices and specialist advice centres, both on-site and online. On my visits to "Wildwasser" and "Hilfe für Jungs" here in Berlin, I learnt how important it is for affected children and young people to be given not only advice, but also support along the difficult road to a new life. What they need are healing communities, trust-filled relationships with people on whom they can rely. Not least, we must also offer more services targeted at people with paedophile tendencies, who are aware of their issues and want to seek help before something happens.

Sexual abuse of children is a serious crime. I am pleased that there is no longer any doubt of this, also thanks to the tightening of criminal law. If we are to be able to better investigate and prosecute crimes in the digital and analogue world, however, we need to strengthen the police and judiciary, too. There needs to be further training and awareness-raising for investigators, judges and public prosecutors; we need instruments that are cutting-edge in both legal and technical terms; we must promote international cooperation so as to tackle human trafficking and other forms of organised crime. I am particularly grateful to the National Council for its work for child-friendly court proceedings. We must ensure that the courts, of all places, are not the site of additional strain and injury for children and adolescents.

Last but not least, we need more research to explore the abysses in our society and to shine light on the darkness of sexual violence against children and young people.

All this costs money. We need to increase investment in education and awareness-raising, in basic and further training, and in good equipment. Above all, however, we need people who act responsibly and assume responsibility at the workplace, in the voluntary sector or in their leisure time.

Today I would like to thank the many women and men engaged in the fight against sexual violence and exploitation; all those who are there for the affected children and adolescents and who provide them with support; all those who are helping to uncover injustice in their institutions, who are uncovering crimes and taking them to court; who are conducting research and providing knowledge; who are fighting for change at political level; who are engaged even though they themselves have suffered sexual violence.

They all frequently hear and see terrible, disturbing, unbearable things. That is true of the members of the National Council and of everyone else engaged in the area. Their work is stressful, but it protects and saves the lives of the weakest in our society. I thank them all for their courage, their persistence and their resolve.

Members of the National Council, I hope that your proposals and ideas will be discussed not only in specialist circles but also by the public, that they raise awareness and bring change where necessary. And I am delighted that the National Council will be continuing its work. Do not give up. Be persistent. Keep raising your voice. We have no time to lose. Every girl and every boy has the right to a life in dignity and safety, to a life free from violence. It is up to us to make this right a reality.

Thank you all very much.