

**Acceptance Speech for the Franco-German Human Rights Prize by Justice Dr.
Mathilda Twomey, chairperson of the Child Law Reform Committee**

30 July 2021

Ambassadors, I am deeply honoured to be selected as deserving to receive this prestigious honour. I accept this Franco-German Prize for Human Rights with a deep sense of humility and gratitude but also responsibility.

On a personal basis, I accept this award on behalf of men and women in Seychelles who have more than I worked tirelessly to bring reform to the law regarding the abuse of children in its multifarious forms and who work endlessly to advance the causes of human rights and the rule of law.

In my role as Chair of the Committee for the Reform of Child Law to prevent and punish child abuse, sexual abuse and exploitation, I sought to strengthen the legal protection offered to children in accordance with the Constitution of Seychelles, and with international and regional human rights law. I will use this prize and my platform to continue to champion the rights of the most vulnerable persons in society.

Since the 1990s, independent human rights institutions have promoted children in public decision-making and discourse. More than 200 such public institutions have been established to independently monitor, promote and protect children's rights, and are now at work in over 70 countries located on all continents around the world. In the vast majority of cases, their creation has followed state ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is core to their operation. Individuals have also worked with the same objective – to promote the best interests of the child and to act as champions for children. There have been some historic gains and some achievements ranging from influencing significant change in national policy to delivering interventions on behalf of individual children.

Yet, with respect to sexual violence against children or child sexual abuse and exploitation, Seychelles has seen increasing reports of diverse acts of abuse, in different settings and relationships - situations where a child is sexually abused by a relative or carer at home; raped for cash or favours; sexually assaulted or abused by an adult in a position of trust or authority; groomed or sexually exploited online by an adult or older child; exploited by organised groups of child sex offenders. Children may not always recognise their experiences as sexual violence or abuse and normalise these situations.

We have a crisis. We have a population of 90,000 people, and while no clear statistics of abuse are available we know that a very high number of persons are affected. We need to recognise that there is a whole generation of people who have been abused, and a generation of men who believe that it is okay to have sex with a child. I am frequently shocked by seeing on the streets the number of older men dating very young women, even girls. We appear to have normalised sexual behaviour in youngsters. We also normalise families encouraging women and children to stay silent in abusive situations for status or to save the family embarrassment. I regularly hear criticism of the motives of victims for coming forward to report abuse. This victim blaming is not acceptable. We need to find a safe way to enable a victim of abuse to share their story and for its veracity to be carefully investigated without causing any further trauma to the victim if it turns out to be true.

Another real situation that flows from this problem is that our system fails to rehabilitate either the offender or the victim adequately. We have a real scarcity of psychological services available. Psychological wellbeing is as important as physical wellbeing, and yet it remains grossly under resourced and under-valued. We coat abuse with a shame that attaches to the victim much more than the abuser.

These situations serve as a horrendous reminder of the urgent need to address Seychelles' response to child abuse and sexual assault in a meaningful, holistic and strategic manner.

This award will sustain the momentum necessary to bring about a sea change in these small islands to realise the work in this area and the enactment of legislation to ensure increased protection against the occurrence of child and sexual abuse and improved responses to allegations and incidents of child abuse and sexual abuse; ensure perpetrators are held to account; provide justice and guarantee psycho-social support to victims; alleviate the trauma suffered by children who enter the criminal justice system as victims and witnesses; encourage the reporting of sexual and child abuse; improve the investigation and prosecution of sexual and other abuse; facilitate greater cooperation, collaboration and information sharing between all stakeholders (public and private) that are responsible for responding to the needs of children; and serve as a deterrent for the commission of crimes committed against children.

Throughout my career as an advocate for human rights, I have championed a culturally sensitive approach to promote the rights of women, young people and children. Let's encourage each other to ask the real questions and demand the truth. Human rights -

children's rights cannot be imposed from the outside. We need to empower each other for development and change to achieve our own human rights.

From the depths of my heart, I thank you again for the Franco-German Prize for Human Rights.

Thank you.