**Speech by Mrs. Bulelwa Hewitt for UN OHCHR Expert Consultation on Street Children Experts: 1 November 2011**

My name is Bulelwa. I am a former street child. I am the co-founder of Umthombo Street Children, a Durban based organisation serving street children in South Africa. I am also a business entrepreneur and I run my own salon and surf shop where I employ former street children as hair stylists and surfing instructors.

I live with the pain of my past every day. Pain from what forced me to the streets and pain from street–life. I grew up living on a municipal rubbish–dump (garbage dump). I chose to run to the streets with my younger siblings, but not because the streets were attractive but because I had to escape. I was a refugee from my own community, in my own town at the age of nine. I was running away from an alcoholic and abusive mother and sexual abuse from community members. I had been stabbed by an adult, raped by neighbors and burned in a shack fire. I was hungry most days and used to scavenge on the rubbish dumps for food. Many things were happening to me. I had to escape. In South Africa, most poor children don’t live in the streets. Something else on top of their poverty pushes them to the streets.

Running to the streets brought more misery to my life. I used to sniff benzene to take away the fear of being on the streets and to stop me thinking about the pain in my life. I had never had the love from a mother that I deserved as a human child yet I became a mother figure to my younger siblings. I was totally incapable at nine years old to be a mother. My life was in chaos. We survived through scavenging for survival and begging at traffic lights where motorists would shout at me, saying, “Go ask Mandela!” Life was a day-to-day survival filled with all types of abuse. We felt and saw much physical and sexual violence. It left me emotionally broken. My childhood was a time of acquiring scars that would stay with for my whole life. We tend to think that street children are resilient. We just have a way of coping. The pain still sits inside us.

It was another street child who got me off the streets. He was a good boy, with real compassion, despite being a glue addict. He could not bear to see my siblings and I suffering on the streets. He took me to a shelter and explained that it was too late for him but he arranged for me to be taken in. I thank God for that boy, called Muntsu. He later died of TB in the streets. He changed my life. He was a champion.

I am always interested to hear the view of “experts” on the street child experience. Sometimes they understand, sometimes they don’t. I have two messages that I would like to bring from my perspective as an African woman and a former street child. These come from my own personal experiences but are issues that I often discuss with other street children and former street children.

Firstly, all street children, to varying degrees, are traumatized. Any global strategy to empower street children must create a path towards emotional healing. Often, NGO’s rejoice at “job done” when a child leaves the streets. Sometimes we are simply a number. We are the ones whose lives go on and the pain of our past and from living street life revisits us as we go through our journey of life. Interventions without empowering us towards healing are not complete. We can self-destruct long after the NGO’s have forgotten about us. We sniff glue or other substances to block the awful memories. We become addicts at an early age. We are broken and in desperate need to healing. Please make the response to the trauma, a central part of strategies. I have witnessed children who are considered the most affected addicts turn their lives around through a fusion of high-intensity engagement programmes and therapeutic social working programmes.

Secondly, there is another subject that I feel very strongly about and that the children of Durban have urged me to highlight. It is a global phenomenon and needs a global response. This is the forced removal of street children ahead of international conferences and events. In many cities, local officers “round-up” these children to “clean” the streets, throwing them out of the city or putting them in makeshift internment centers thinly disguised as care centers. They say it’s because of the threat of crime but we know that it is because of image.

When I was a child I also suffered at the hand of authorities. We used to fear police, security guards and municipal officials. They would chase us with whips and beat us for being street children. Fire-officers hosed us down on cold days to teach us a lesson. In Durban, where I live, there is a history of forced removals of street children around international conferences. I have seen it. I have watched children being removed from the city in the months before the FIFA World Cup. The children were trafficked out of the city. These children would return, sometimes days later, saying that they had been dumped, hours outside of the city, and told never to come back. They would walk for hours to get back only to be rounded-up again.

When children are mistreated by officials and rounded-up forcefully, they are sometimes beaten. In my City this came to a head in the run-up to the FIFA World Cup. The round-ups were halted due to a strong campaign against such actions. Street children were meaningfully engaged and included during the World Cup. There were no incidents of street children attacking tourists in Durban.

Forced removals of street children happen in cities all over the world. From Durban to Kampala and from New Delhi to Addis Ababa yet there is no global outrage or campaign to rebuke such actions. Police abuse against street children terrorizes and traumatizes these children further. As decision makers around the urban phenomenon of street children, if you are not speaking up about this issue then you are not listening to the cries of street children across the world. Governments need to be told that this is unacceptable behavior. It needs to become socially unacceptable to stretch city bylaws such as loitering and vagrancy to criminalize these children and to traffic them out of the city. Local authorities need to understand that hurting street children will have consequences to their image.

To be against the forced removals of street children does not mean that you want children to be in the streets. It means that you are acknowledging that street children are not a Safety and Security issue but a Social Development one where psychologists, social workers and other carers are the key role players not police. I make a call today to make the forced removal of street children, as a means to cleaning –up cities for visitors, an unacceptable intervention. Street children are not rubbish to be cleaned up but traumatized children who have been failed by society. We ask conference delegates in visiting cities where this happens to say “not in our name.” I ask governments and NGO’s to work together towards compassionate solutions that embrace and empower street children.

I thank you for the chance to speak here today and share my thoughts as a former street child. I bring greetings from the street children of Durban, South Africa who continue to inspire me. My prayer is that no child should have to have the childhood that I had.