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Pain from Jean's childhood lingers; Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean in a London visit, urges Canadians to help end domestic violence.

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Hours before addressing a crowd of 1,000 last night on the personally painful topic of violence against children, Michaëlle Jean casually chatted with a handful of young London women.

And the small group at that closed-door afternoon talk saw a much different governor general than those who attended her public speech at the London Convention Centre.

Though Jean was formal and eloquent during her public appearance, the young women described a head of state who lounged in her chair, offered encouraging advice and was "cool," in the words of Laura MacLean.

"A lot of the themes and issues she's confronting are ones she's dealt with herself," the 17-year-old Laurier high school student said. "She's sincere. You can see it."

Jean's honesty, MacLean added, is what makes her so inspiring.

"She made me cry," said 17-year-old Warsan Amin who, like MacLean, is part of a University of Western Ontario study on the effects violence has on women.

"She said 'You're a wonderful person, I can see that.' You forgot that she was governor general for a while," Amin said.

Last night's speech marked the start of the Third International Conference on Children Exposed to Domestic Violence, which has drawn hundreds of experts from some 20 countries to London until tomorrow.

It's also the first visit in years to the Forest City by the Queen's representative to Canada. It's believed the most recent scheduled visit was in 2001, during the Canada Summer Games.

But Adrienne Clarkson, the then governor general, cancelled due to a family illness.

Jean, her voice tinged with a French accent, stood at a podium -- her image projected on two large screens -- and shared her childhood in Haiti, where she says child beatings were common.

"I remember people actually selling whips on the streets of Port-au-Prince when I was a child," she said, adding she moved here at age 11. "Just like every other child in Haiti at the time, I felt the pain of this method of discipline."

"Those practices leave deep scars. They teach children the only way to resolve conflict or to express disagreement is through physical violence."

She also cited numerous studies, including a Canadian report that there were more than 100,000 substantiated cases of "child maltreatment" in Canada in 2003.

Before receiving a standing ovation, Jean implored Canadians to help end domestic violence against women and children by speaking out.

"Because violence thrives in silence," she said. "We must break these silences -- however frightening or embarrassing -- for the good of our children.

"For their sake and for ours, let us speak up loudly and speak out often, until we end this violence."

That kind of public statement from a high-profile Canadian can lead to real change, say conference organizers.

But so, too, can intimate face-to-face talks, the young women who spent the afternoon with Jean will likely say.

"She's very human," said Lina Rodriguez, a 19-year-old UWO student. "She's very down-to-earth. The thing that really impressed me was . . . she was ordinary."