

**51st session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women
26 February to 9 March 2007**

**Interactive expert panel
Key policy initiatives to eliminate all forms of discrimination
and violence against the girl child**

27 February 2007

Moderator's Summary

1. At its third meeting, on 27 February 2007, the Commission on the Status of Women held a panel discussion followed by a dialogue on the theme “key policy initiatives to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child”. The panellists were: Ms. Maria Lucia Pinto Leal, Professor of Social Work at Brasilia University, Brazil; Ms. Michal Komem, Programme Manager of Youth Programmes, Association for Planning and Development of Services for Children and Youth and Their Families, Israel; Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict; Ms. Angela Kocze, Central European University and former Director of the European Roma Information Office, Hungary; and Ms. Judith Bruce, Senior Associate, Poverty, Gender and Youth Programme, Population Council, and a co-chair of the expert group meeting on the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child convened by the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, in collaboration with UNICEF, at the Innocenti Research Centre in Florence, Italy from 25 to 28 September 2006. The panel was moderated by Ms. Carmen María Gallardo, Chairperson of the Commission.

2. Participants recognized that girls of all ages around the world continued to be victims of discrimination and violence. Despite increasing efforts to improve the situation of the girl child, girls remained largely ‘invisible’ in public policies and programmes, and their needs unmet. Participants further noted the persistence of multiple forms of discrimination against girls, and its intersection with other factors. In this regard, participants identified several groups of especially vulnerable and invisible girls, including girls belonging to ethnic and religious minorities; girls belonging to pastoral or nomadic communities; girls with disabilities; girls living in rural areas; migrant girls and girls in rural and remote areas; girls affected by armed conflict; girls living under foreign occupation; girls who are internally displaced; girls infected with and affected by HIV/AIDS; working girls, including girl domestic workers; girl heads of households; child mothers; and girls facing harmful traditional and social practices, such as female

genital mutilation/cutting and early marriage. Participants emphasized the need for targeted policies for the benefit of girls at high risk of discrimination and violence.

3. Participants noted that girls' invisibility was heightened by the social isolation and marginalization of particular communities in which they lived. The challenge of providing equal opportunities to such girls, for example Roma or San girls, was highlighted. Little attention was paid to the needs and concerns of girls living outside of family structures. Furthermore, the needs of girls were often submerged within those of families. As a result, girls' needs, as well as their aspirations and capabilities, were neglected and their potential for personal development restricted. Insufficient information about girls and their particular circumstances, the scope and forms of discrimination they were subjected to, and their specific needs, increased the challenge of putting in place effective policy measures.

4. Much discrimination and violence against girls occurred in the private sphere of their homes and communities, and the perpetrators of crimes against girls were often those charged with their protection. Participants noted that traditional and cultural practices also contributed to the perpetuation of discrimination and violence against girls. In many situations, discrimination and violence against girls was further compounded by factors such as global economic inequality, negative consequences of globalization and insufficient attention to social issues. The multi-dimensional aspects of discrimination and violence against girls necessitated a multi-dimensional and multi-sectoral response.

5. Participants noted that violence against girls was accentuated in armed conflict. Girls were direct victims of conflict-related violence, and were also victims of other forms of violence, such as rape or sexual exploitation, and trafficking. While some girls initially might willingly become combatants, they ended up trapped in cycles of violence. Girls in conflict were also vulnerable to sexual exploitation by peacekeepers. While the efforts of the United Nations to address the situation were recognized, there was a need for increased training and accountability of all those involved in peacekeeping operations, and in particular of soldiers on missions, in order to prevent situations of sexual exploitation of girls, and to prosecute offenders effectively.

6. Participants noted the challenges of reintegrating girls into mainstream society after conflicts, especially as disarmament, demobilization and reconstruction programmes often neglected to address their specific circumstances and needs. There was a significant need to put in place targeted programmes for girls emerging from conflict situations. Attention was also drawn to the situation of internally displaced girls, who lacked access to food, shelter and proper healthcare facilities, and engaged in high-risk behaviour. During conflict and its aftermath, the number of households headed by girls often increased, posing particular challenges. Enhanced attention to the rights of girls living under foreign occupation was also necessary.

7. Participants were concerned about girls' vulnerability to trafficking, especially for sexual exploitation. The complex nature of this phenomenon required comprehensive attention at the national level, as well as enhanced cross-border cooperation. Participants

pointed out that new technologies, including the Internet, were of increasing concern as they were used for the exploitation of girls.

8. Participants discussed the impact of early marriage on girls' rights, empowerment and future opportunities, especially in regard to education and health. Girls in such marriages often dropped out of school and/or became child mothers. Early childbearing also carried a series of health-related risks, including that of obstetric fistula. Attention was drawn to female genital mutilation/cutting, a harmful practice that occurred in many parts of the world, including in some immigrant communities. Participants noted efforts in place in a number of countries to prohibit this practice, punish perpetrators and raise awareness about its negative consequences. Participants also noted other harmful practices against girls, for example initiation rituals.

9. Participants underscored the need for appropriate legislative frameworks to protect the right of the girl child to be free from discrimination and all forms of violence. In this context, the importance of adhering to international human rights instruments on the human rights of the girl child and incorporating their provisions into national legislation was emphasized. Particular attention was drawn to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and their respective Optional Protocols. Participants gave examples of recent initiatives aimed at enhancing compliance with these conventions, including the adoption of new and strengthening of existing legislation aimed at preventing and combating sexual exploitation of girls, trafficking in women and girls, and harmful traditional and cultural practices, including female genital mutilation/cutting.

10. While recognizing the importance of adequate legislation, participants highlighted the need for its effective implementation and enforcement in order to prevent impunity and enhance accountability for violations of girls' rights. Participants noted that legislation had to be complemented by targeted policies and programmes aimed at the girl child, and at the elimination of structural gender-based discrimination against women.

11. Comprehensive policies and national action plans to address the needs of children in areas such as education and healthcare, and to tackle discrimination and violence against the girl child were in place in a number of countries. Participants emphasized the importance of building partnerships and coalitions, including with non-governmental organizations, for their effective development and implementation. Similarly, institutional structures aimed at enhancing children's well-being had been created such as special commissions, commissioners, or ombudsman that also supported the elimination of discrimination and violence against the girl child. It was also suggested that existing youth strategies may require reconsideration from a gender perspective, as the concerns of girls often differed from those of boys. The need to sensitize poor, marginalized communities to the rights and needs of girls was also raised.

12. Participants drew attention to the urgent need to enhance availability of data disaggregated by sex, age, ethnicity and other factors. More research on the situation of

girls of different age groups, and of girls at risk, was also needed in order to develop better targeted policies and programmes, as well as to enhance monitoring and evaluation. Participants stressed that data needed to be collected and disaggregated at the national and sub-national/local level, as nationally aggregated statistics tended to mask the reality of girls within their communities. Indicators were also needed for monitoring purposes and to better track the impact of policies and progress over time. Attention was drawn to lack of data in different areas, for example the prevalence of different traditional practices.

13. Participants underlined that girls' empowerment was vital to eliminating discrimination and violence against the girl child. Education was key, and participants agreed that all efforts should be made to ensure that all girls have equal access to quality education. Examples were provided of education projects as well as awareness-raising campaigns that had led to an increase in the enrollment of girls in low attendance districts, including through improved safety of public streets and schools. Girls' participation in shaping their own future was also considered critical to their empowerment, and should be encouraged and fostered through their active involvement in the development of policies and programmes that directly affected them.

14. The role of men and boys in strategies to eliminate discrimination and violence against girls was discussed. Participants noted that well-developed youth initiatives, such as youth centres, existed in many countries. However, as these rarely had a sex- or age-specific focus, they did not adequately respond to the needs of girls. Successful efforts to support girls at high risk of discrimination and violence existed but these initiatives continued to be small-scale and failed to reach all girls in risk situations. Efforts to enhance justice systems for children and to protect girl victims of violence, for example during criminal proceedings, were also discussed.

15. Participants highlighted the importance of resources to implement programmes aimed at eliminating discrimination and violence against the girl child, especially in developing countries, including through bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

16. Participants called for the availability of safe spaces for girls of different age groups, where they could safely interact with their peers, as well as with role models or mentors. Such spaces should exist also outside the family and the school environment. Other structures and mechanisms to support girls were also noted, including community workers, social support networks, counseling, including for vulnerable groups of girls. Participants welcomed the exchange about such good practices as they could be replicated and adapted in other situations as well.