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Commission on the Status of Women

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Agenda item 3 (a) (ii)

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: review theme: the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child

Elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child

Moderator’s summary

1. On 25 February 2011, the Commission on the Status of Women held an interactive dialogue to evaluate progress in the implementation of the agreed conclusions on the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child, adopted by the Commission at its fifty-first session in 2007 (E/2007/27-E/CN.6/2007/9, chap. I, sect. A). The interactive dialogue focused on the sharing of national experiences in implementing the agreed conclusions, highlighting achievements, gaps and challenges, and good practices and strategies for further and accelerated implementation.

2. The review session was moderated by Fillipo Cinti, Vice-Chair of the Commission. A keynote speaker, Saad Houry, Deputy Executive Director, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), opened the discussion. Three young women, Ika, Ya Marie and Lil Shira, presented their experiences in helping girls who have been subjected to discrimination and violence, including forced prostitution, teenage pregnancy, corporal punishment in schools, harassment in the community and schools, female genital mutilation/cutting, and trafficking. They also presented their experiences in working to raise awareness of girls’ human rights and create positive change, including through information and communications technology, so that girls can access education, live free from violence and enjoy all their human rights. An issues paper provided the framework for the discussion.

3. Discrimination and violence against girls begins at the early stages of their lives. The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child is a priority issue at global, regional and national levels. While some progress has been made in implementing the agreed conclusions since 2007, discrimination and violation of the human rights of girls persist. There is a need to reinforce, expand and replicate good practices, and to use them as the basis for designing and implementing better laws, policies and programmes.

Progress made in implementation

4. Stronger legislative and policy frameworks are increasingly in place to uphold the human rights of women and children and to prevent and address violence against women and girls. Numerous States have adopted laws and policies to address the multiple forms of violence against girls, including human trafficking, female genital mutilation/cutting and early and forced marriage. Legislation has also been adopted to combat sexual exploitation of children and child pornography. Some national gender equality strategies or action plans integrate a focus on the girl child, and girls benefit from the enactment of gender equality laws. The potential of gender-responsive budgeting as an important tool to accelerate the elimination of discrimination and violence against girls is recognized.

5. Efforts to raise awareness of children's human rights, including the rights of girls, and to challenge gender stereotypes are being enhanced. Good practices include media campaigns, the designation of national girl child days, and the elimination of gender biases and integration of children's and girls' human rights in school curricula and non-formal education systems. Specialized training and manuals have resulted in a better understanding of children's rights among teachers and public officials. Programmes engaging men and boys are being strengthened in many countries, with an emphasis on educating men and boys about women's and girls' human rights and fostering role models to promote respect and non-violent manhood.

6. Progress has been made in reducing female genital mutilation/cutting in several countries through a mix of strategies. These include criminalization, community engagement and the mobilization of community and faith-based leaders to foster collective abandonment.

7. Many States are conducting campaigns to raise awareness concerning violence against girls, including in relation to female genital mutilation/cutting, human trafficking, sexual harassment, sexual violence in armed conflict, and forced and early marriage. The establishment of specialized police units and prosecutors trained in the causes and consequences of violence against women and girls is a good practice that more and more States are instituting. Support and services for child victims of violence are also increasingly in place.

8. Initiatives to address discrimination and violence against women and girls increasingly involve multiple stakeholders, including Government, civil society, religious and community leaders, and men and boys, which positively affects the implementation of laws and policies. Examples of such collaboration are seen in mechanisms to implement national action plans, institutions for the eradication of child labour, networks to prevent trafficking in children and committees to ensure compliance with laws prohibiting female genital mutilation/cutting.

9. Global commitments to achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education have led to expanded programme interventions in many countries. Access to education has increased globally for girls at all levels. Measures to enhance girls' access to education include upgrading sanitation facilities at schools, adopting policies to ensure continued education for pregnant adolescents, abolishing school fees and introducing school feeding programmes.

Gaps and challenges in implementation

10. Despite progress achieved, participants expressed concern about the slow pace of change and the persistent discrimination and violation of the human rights of girls and women, which begins early in their lives and continues throughout their childhood, adolescence and lifetime. In many countries, a gender-neutral approach to children's rights continues, and the commitment to addressing the situation of girls is not made explicit.

11. In general, few legal frameworks specifically address the situation of girls. Where legal reforms have taken place, legislation is often not effectively enforced, and public officials remain unaware of the laws and their duties to implement them. The girl child does not yet receive sufficient attention in policy and programme development or resource allocation, and girls have little opportunity to make their voices heard in the development of public policy. There is insufficient focus on the needs and rights of adolescent girls. Too often, adolescent girls find themselves prematurely in the adult roles of wife, mother, worker or caretaker, losing the special circumstances of childhood.

12. Structural and other causes of unequal power relations between women and men are not sufficiently addressed in efforts to combat discrimination and violence against girls. Patriarchal norms and male dominance remain deeply embedded in many societies. Attitudes, behaviour and expectations based on gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles in the family and society continue to reinforce gender inequality and negatively affect girls' self-esteem and opportunities, as well as the exercise of their rights. Stereotypes often entrench the subordinate position of girls and represent a significant barrier to achieving the practical realization of the human rights of girls and the elimination of violence against them.

13. Many girls lack awareness of their human rights and are not empowered to claim them, although this is key to breaking the cycle of violence and discrimination. The views of girls are rarely taken into account when decisions are made in matters affecting them and more participation of girls is needed. Girls need to be recognized as key actors in promoting gender equality and their own empowerment.

14. Girls remain particularly vulnerable to different forms of violence, including in the home, the community, the workplace and educational institutions, as well as in conflict and post-conflict situations. Participants noted the persistence of harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation/cutting and early marriage, as well as other forms of violence, including sexual harassment, human trafficking and prenatal sex selection. Impunity continues for perpetrators; reinforced measures to ensure increased reporting, prosecution and punishment are required. While initiatives to address violence against women and girls have been diversified and enhanced, they are often not comprehensive, consistent or sustained, and do not sufficiently address the root causes of violence, such as gender inequality and

poverty. Despite the growth in services addressing violence against women and girls, they remain far from adequate to meet the needs, which are huge. The lack of resources and capacities required for the implementation of laws and policies remains a persistent barrier to addressing violence against women.

15. The impact of programmes engaging men and boys to end discrimination and violence against girls and women remains minimal, and few of these programmes explicitly focus on behaviour change among adolescent boys. These efforts have often been small in scale and limited in sustainability. A better understanding of how boys' experiences relate to the persisting violation of girls' and women's human rights is necessary.

16. Despite significant achievements in gender parity in education, numbers vary greatly between regions and countries. Girls continue to face significant barriers in access to education and are more likely than boys to drop out of school, as a result, inter alia, of gender stereotypes, the allocation to girls of domestic work and caregiving responsibilities and resource constraints. Participants noted that the inadequacy or lack of sanitation, including toilet and washing facilities, can prevent girls from accessing education.

17. Girls continue to have insufficient access to health services and information, including reproductive health and family planning services, and remain particularly vulnerable to HIV and AIDS. The adolescent birth rate also remains high in some regions. Child labour continues to affect many girls, who are often exposed to long working hours and abuse and are denied their rights.

18. The inadequacy of data and statistics on the situation of girls is a major constraint to formulating and implementing effective, targeted policies and programmes, as well as to monitoring progress in the elimination of discrimination and violence against the girl child. Increased quality of data and research on the situation of girls, including the multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion they face, is needed to better inform laws and policies and assess the impact of measures taken.

Recommendations to accelerate implementation

19. Based on experience and good practice, participants recommended a range of actions to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against girls, including the following:

(a) Adopt comprehensive strategies that create an enabling and supportive environment for girls, including with attention to the rights and needs of adolescent girls;

(b) Ensure effective implementation of laws and policies aimed at the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child, including through adequate funding, systematic and sustained capacity-building of State and non-State actors, and the establishment and/or strengthening of monitoring and enforcement mechanisms with the participation of all relevant stakeholders;

(c) Enhance education and awareness-raising programmes to eliminate discrimination and violence against girls; such programmes should be targeted at girls and boys, women and men, as well as communities, families and the general public, including through the use of media and new technologies;

(d) Strengthen girls' knowledge of their rights and promote their empowerment and increased participation in the development of public policy and in decision-making, inter alia, through the education system, through enhanced social networks for girls and by exposing girls to women and girl leaders as role models;

(e) Expand interventions to engage boys and men in efforts to end discrimination and violence against girls into systematic, large-scale and coordinated programmes, targeting young boys in particular, and strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations that work with boys and men;

(f) Enhance efforts to address discriminatory attitudes and gender stereotypes and to transform power relations, through curriculum revision and teacher training in the education sector and by adopting awareness campaigns targeting a variety of stakeholders, including the private sector, political parties, community and religious leaders, the educational system, media and the general public, as well as by gaining a better understanding of the role of social norms and how they affect the decision-making processes of individuals, families and communities and designing policies and strategies based on that understanding;

(g) Create safe environments for girls and enhance measures to prevent and address violence against them, including through comprehensive laws and strategies that punish perpetrators, support and assist the victims, and mandate prevention measures and by building consensus in society against all forms of violence against girls and women;

(h) Ensure access to high-quality education at all levels and appropriate health and nutrition information and services for girls;

(i) Expand the use of gender-responsive budgeting with special attention to the needs of the girl child;

(j) Improve the collection, analysis and use of sex- and age-disaggregated data and qualitative research on the situation of girls to inform policies and programmes that recognize and respond to the multiple forms of discrimination and violence that girls face and to assess and monitor the impact of the steps taken.