

Opening statement
Ms. Carolyn Hannan
Director, Division for the Advancement of Women

**Expert Group Meeting on “The Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination and
Violence against the Girl Child”**
organized by
The United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)
in collaboration with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)

UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, Italy
25-28 September 2006

Distinguished experts, observers and colleagues,

I am pleased to welcome you to this Expert Group Meeting on “The Elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child”. I warmly welcome and thank the experts for accepting the invitation of the United Nations to share your expertise on this important topic. I also extend a welcome to all other participants who are attending as observers from Governments, United Nations and non-governmental organizations.

I would like to begin by expressing deep appreciation to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) for their collaboration and contribution to the preparation of this expert meeting, in particular Ms. Noreen Khan and her colleagues in the Gender Equality and Human Rights Unit. We are delighted that the Deputy Executive Director for UNICEF, Ms Rima Salah, will attend part of the Expert Group Meeting. We look forward to welcoming her tomorrow. I would also like to express our warm thanks to Ms. Marta Santos Pais and her colleagues for hosting the meeting at the extraordinary setting and excellent facilities of the Innocenti Research Centre, and for making us feel so welcome.

Although no girl child representatives are present at this meeting, Liv Indreiten and Mima Perisic from UNICEF will make a presentation on the voices of girls later this morning, to ensure that girls' own perspectives are brought into focus. UNICEF will also organize translation of the report from this Expert Group Meeting into child-friendly language to increase outreach to girls around the world. We are working collaboratively to ensure that there will be many girls from different regions at the Commission on the Status of Women in February/March next year.

The Division for the Advancement of Women holds expert meetings prior to each session of the Commission on the Status of Women as a means of ensuring access to the latest research and practical experience on the themes before the Commission. At its 51st session from 26 February to 9 March 2007, the Commission on the Status of Women will address the priority theme “The Elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child”.

At its 50th session in March this year, the Commission adopted new working methods, which place a stronger emphasis on the implementation of the commitments made at the Fourth World Conference in Beijing and the outcome of the 23rd special session of the General Assembly. In its Declaration, the Commission called for full and accelerated implementation of existing commitments. The Commission will consider the implementation of commitments in relation to one priority theme at its annual sessions, the outcome of which will be policy recommendations (or agreed conclusions) to enhance implementation. The agreed conclusions on the priority theme will be broadly disseminated to governments, the United Nations system, NGOs and other relevant stakeholders.

To facilitate the development of the agreed conclusions, an interactive expert panel will be held on the theme of the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child during the Commission next February. The results of this expert group meeting will be presented during the panel and the report of the meeting will also be widely distributed to delegates at the Commission. The expert group meeting thus provides an extremely important opportunity to make a critical input to the Commissions' agreed conclusions which will provide the global consensus on the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child.

The issue of the girl child has been firmly placed on the international agenda over the past decade and a half in many important intergovernmental processes in the United Nations. The 1990 Declaration of the World Summit for Children accorded priority attention to the girl child's survival, development and protection. At the Summit, the international community acknowledged that the equal rights of girls and equal participation of women in the social, cultural, economic and political life of societies are a prerequisite for successful and sustainable development. The follow-up to the Summit at the twenty-seventh special session of the General Assembly in 2002 recognized that the achievement of development goals for children, particularly girls, was contingent upon women's empowerment.

In 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action recognized that discrimination and violence against girls begin at the earliest stages of life and continue unabated throughout their lives. It noted that girls often have less access than boys to nutrition, physical and mental health care and education and enjoy fewer rights, opportunities and benefits of childhood and adolescence. Many girls are particularly vulnerable to violence and exploitation. Discrimination and neglect of girls in childhood can initiate a lifelong downward spiral of deprivation and exclusion from the social mainstream.

At its forty-second session in 1998, the Commission on the Status of Women followed up on the Critical Area of Concern on the girl child and adopted new recommendations through agreed conclusions, which outlined actions and initiatives aimed at the promotion and protection of the human rights of the girl child; increased education and empowerment of the girl child; improving the health needs of girls, addressing the situation of girls in armed conflict, combating trafficking and eliminating child labour.

In the five-year review of implementation of the Platform for Action at the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly in 2000, child labour, violence, lack of access to education, and sexual abuse were identified as some of the obstacles that the girl child continues to face.

The report of the Secretary-General on the ten-year review of the Platform for Action in 2005 concluded that progress has been made by many countries in the advancement of the girl child, in particular in the recognition of the human rights of the girl child through the adoption of appropriate legislation, and in increased access to primary education. It noted, however, further efforts were needed to ensure equal access to secondary education and to job opportunities, to eradicate sex work by children, to ensure reintegration of the girl child after armed conflicts, and to improve collection of data on the situation of the girl child.

At the 2005 World Summit, world leaders reaffirmed their previous commitments to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls. At its sixtieth session, the General Assembly adopted resolution 60/141 on the girl child, in which it expressed deep concern about discrimination against the girl child and the violation of her rights and stressed the importance of a substantive assessment of the implementation of the Platform for Action with a life-cycle perspective.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) contain mutually reinforcing principles which should ensure protection and fulfilment of the rights of girls and end gender-based discrimination. However, as will be emphasized by Professor Savitri Goonesekere later today, it is important that the implementation of the general norms on children as well as the norms on women / gender equality allow for a very specific focus on the rights of the girl child. Despite the existing international legal framework, girls continue to face de jure and de facto inequalities in virtually all societies.

The Study of the Independent Expert on Violence against Children and the Secretary-General's In-depth Study on Violence against Women, which will be presented to the General Assembly at its sixty-first session next month, provide complementary analyses of the problem of gender-based violence, its forms, scope and manifestations across the lifespan, including on the girl child, as well as many recommendations for concrete actions, which emphasize the responsibility of states to eliminate this violence.

The decision of the Commission on the Status of Women to focus on the girl child as its priority theme in 2007 provides an excellent opportunity to assess progress in implementation of the recommendations on eliminating discrimination and violence against the girl child, and to identify strategies to address the remaining challenges. The Expert Group Meeting provides this group of selected experts the opportunity to have a significant impact on this process.

I would encourage you to use the opportunity this meeting provides effectively. Over the coming days, you will share achievements, lessons learned, and good practices, critically examine factors that impede the elimination of all forms of discrimination and

violence against the girl child, and provide concrete policy recommendations for governments, the United Nations and other relevant stakeholders.

The focus of the meeting covers four main areas: the protection of the girl child, the girl child in especially vulnerable situations, the empowerment of the girl child, and the institutional arrangements to accelerate the elimination of discrimination and violence against the girl child. Within these areas, issues such as ensuring access to education and training and health services, including reproductive health; addressing the persistence of harmful traditional practices, vulnerability in the labour market, situations of armed conflict and its aftermath, and in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic; promoting the more active engagement of men and boys; as well as developing effective institutional arrangements, such as ensuring data disaggregated by sex and age and assessing budget allocations and expenditures from a girl-child perspective, will be discussed.

Since the World Summit on Children and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, awareness of the specific vulnerability of girls and the need for increased prevention and protection from discrimination and violence has grown considerably. For example, since the adoption of the Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security in 2000, there is greater awareness of the specific targeting of girls for sexual exploitation and of the fact that girls as well as boys are child soldiers with specific needs that must be addressed in post-conflict rehabilitation. The specific vulnerabilities of girls in relation to HIV/AIDS are increasingly clear - both their risks of infection through sexual exploitation and the enormous responsibilities they shoulder in caring for siblings in child-run households, with limited access to essential resources. The precarious situation of girls in the labour market, including in domestic services which exposes them to exploitative working conditions and sexual abuse, are well known, as is the negative impact of the heavy burdens of girls who support the women in their families in carrying out their responsibilities.

Girls are too often vulnerable in many contexts where they should feel safe - within their families and schools and in other community settings where they should be surrounded by adults who care for them rather than abuse them. A disturbing example can be given from refugee camps. It is unacceptable that girls who make it to the supposed safety of camps should be exposed to further risks of sexual exploitation, including at times by the very people who should be protecting them. Another area of exploitation of girls which is only beginning to be exposed is in the arena of sports. Abuse of power by coaches, trainers, managers and others in leadership positions within the sports world is widespread and should be documented and addressed.

This increased awareness of the many dimensions of the vulnerability of girls has, however, not always translated into systematic attention to the situation of girls in data collection, research, analysis, planning resource allocation and implementation of interventions. Greater advocacy is needed to ensure that the increased awareness leads to concrete action and potential for radically improved situations for girls - reduction of their vulnerabilities, promotion, protection and fulfillment of their rights, and increased opportunities for their wellbeing and advancement.

I am sure that there will rightly be a strong focus on protection issues in this meeting. I would like, however, to encourage you to also think creatively about the empowerment of the girl child, including in relation to developing leadership. Empowerment during early adolescence needs particular attention as girls at this stage in their lives may find that their worlds "shrink" significantly. They may be withdrawn school, face increased labour demands from within their families which limits their free time, have less access to their peers and friends, and even be confined to the immediate vicinity of the home or forced into early marriage. They can experience confusion at being "left out" or "left behind", which can have a negative impact on their self-esteem and confidence and thus be very disempowering.

Empowerment requires addressing the often low levels of expectations for girls which are internalized by girls themselves, as well as the lack of opportunities. Education can play a critical role in providing skills and capabilities, opportunities for developing social networks, a safe space for exploring new ideas and for sport and recreation. The fact that schools can, however, also be disempowering spaces for girls, in particular by exposing them to sexual exploitation and abuse, needs to be explicitly recognized and addressed.

Work on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has shown that girls do not have equitable access to this critical resource in homes, schools and community facilities. They risk being left behind in this new arena and losing access to an empowering tool which offers new spaces and opportunities for learning.

Issues of economic empowerment and security also need to be specifically addressed. Girls in rural areas face additional constraints, especially in situations of poverty. The livelihood of girls, particularly in the context of HIV/AIDs, need further explicit attention. Economic disempowerment and insecurity forces many girls to make risky choices, often involving sexual abuse.

Greater attention has to be given to access to decision-making and participation for girls. This requires attention to girls themselves as well as to key actors in their environments. Many girls can be discouraged or even punished for having opinions and trying to make their voices heard. Opportunities for civic participation need to be provided. Older women can play critical roles as mentors and role models.

One of the critical strategies for empowering girls and expanding their opportunities is addressing persistent stereotypical attitudes and behaviours. An important outcome of the 10-year review of implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action was recognition that attitudes and behaviours - of the general public as well as bureaucrats in government - have not changed at the same pace as policies and legislation. Greater efforts are needed to address the gap between policies/norms and practice. There must be in this context a strong focus on men and boys.

There is a great deal of diversity in the situation of girls around the world. It is important not to see the problem of the girl child as only relevant to the developing world. Girls in developed countries can also face significant discrimination and violence which must be identified and addressed.

The establishment of an enabling environment for girls will be critical for eliminating discrimination and violence against them. The framework developed for promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women – focused on developing **capabilities**, increasing access to **resources and opportunities**, enhancing **agency and leadership**, promoting and protecting **human rights** and ensuring **security** - is equally relevant for the girl child.

The preparatory work done by the Division for the Advancement of Women indicates that one of main challenges today remains the persistent lack of explicit attention to the girl child. Much important work is still done at national level, and by international and regional organizations, including the United Nations, with the assumption that interventions focused generally on children will automatically address the concerns of girls. We in this room know too well from the long history of work on gender equality that there is no such automatic process. We have had to struggle – and continue to struggle - to ensure a specific focus on women – through targeted interventions for women, through the gender mainstreaming strategy, and through a specific human rights treaty. The same efforts are clearly needed to ensure that the needs, priorities and contributions of the girl child are adequately addressed in all areas.

As the introduction to my statement illustrates, we already have many good policy recommendations and human rights standards on the girl child. The Commission on the Status of Women has emphasized the importance of ensuring accelerated implementation of these policies and norms. The focus of the meeting should, therefore, be on identifying:

- The current critical **issues** in relation to the girl child;
- The **strategies** utilized to address these and their effectiveness;
- The main **achievements** and **gaps and challenges**;
- The **recommendations** required to accelerate implementation.

The discussions at this Expert Group Meeting should address a number of key questions:

- Are the many excellent **specific policy recommendations on the girl child**, arising, for example, from the summit on children and the world conferences on women as well as their follow-up processes; being adequately implemented? If not, why not?
- Are the **general policy recommendation on children**, in particular through the summit on children and its follow-up, being used in a gender-sensitive manner, ie. considering the specific situation of the girl child when developing policies, legislation and planning other actions, including targeted interventions for girls where needed?
- Are the **human rights conventions** on children (CRC) and on women (CEDAW) adequately considering the rights of the girl child? And if not what can be done to improve this?

As well as identifying gaps and challenges in eliminating discrimination and violence against the girl child, this meeting could also make a critical contribution by identifying strategies and methodologies which have worked in different contexts and

which could be replicated in other areas. I would therefore encourage you to share as many good practice examples as possible in your presentations and discussions.

One area which requires considerable further attention is the strategy of gender mainstreaming. Issues critical to eliminating discrimination and violence against the girl child are not given sufficient attention in mainstream processes - the girl child remains invisible in many critical contexts. As mentioned earlier, far too often it is expected that girls are adequately covered when "children" are mentioned; or when the term "women and girls" is used generically without any specific reference to the situation of girls. Increased efforts are required to ensure that areas of concern on the girl child are given priority attention through more effective implementation of the gender mainstreaming strategy, in policy processes, in treaty body processes and in implementation of projects and programmes on the ground.

We have a challenging four days ahead. A focused approach and hard work is required to ensure that the Experts have time to discuss the relevant issues, arrive at consensus on the findings and recommendations of the meeting and produce a concise, well-written and focused report – all within four days.

This Expert Group Meeting has brought together many leaders in this field who play a major role in promoting gender equality and empowerment of women, and who focus specifically on the girl child in their work. I am fully confident that your individual knowledge, experience and expertise from national, regional and global contexts will provide important insights and guarantee the success of this meeting. I wish you very productive discussions and an excellent outcome.

I and my colleagues from the Division for the Advancement of Women, Sharon Taylor and Andrea Volfova, are ready to assist you in your work in whatever way possible.

Thank you.