

## Welcome statement

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**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 from the UN and international NGOs, I would like to welcome you to this second day of work at this important Expert Group Meeting on “The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child”. Although I was not here yesterday I have been informed that you had an intense and fruitful day of work and before you start today I would like to share a few thoughts with you from UNICEF’s work for and with girls as this meeting addresses a topic at the **heart of UNICEF’s agenda** and is also a **central piece of the UNICEF Mission Statement** .

Therefore, this meeting is particularly timely and has a unique potential to influence the UN agenda, as well as the international and national policy debate. As we all know, this Expert meeting is a critical contribution to next year’s session of the Commission on the Status on Women as it is dedicated to the situation of girls around the world and by the same token a significant step toward placing girls at the heart of future policy discussions.

Just within a few weeks, the General Assembly will consider two major studies on Violence against Children and Violence against Women and the outcome of our meeting has a decisive relevance for the process of implementation and follow-up to the recommendations presented by these two critical reports. Furthermore, this meeting is of critical relevance for the process of review and follow-up to the agenda agreed upon at the Special Session on Children, which will be held in the fall of 2007 within the General Assembly.

UNICEF is very happy to be part of this important work as is the Expert Group Meeting and the report that will come out of this meeting.

*“[P]ersistent gender discrimination and inequality towards a girl child [are] manifested in the form of heinous practices like female infanticide and feticide, genital mutilation, domestic abuse, incest, sexual exploitation, non-accessibility of primary education and child labour. . .” (22 year old young woman, India)*

However, for us it is critical to address freedom from this discrimination and violence from the perspective of the human rights of girls – not simply with a view to acknowledge the need for their protection, as vulnerable, voiceless and beneficiaries of programmes, assistance and care; but in their role as citizens and subjects of human rights, in their right and ability to influence policies and programmes, to contribute to their development and overall progress in their societies.

- **When it comes to the Protection of the girl:**

The **UN Study on Violence against Children**, which will be launched on October 11, makes it clear that girls are particularly vulnerable to many forms of violence and the interventions to address the violence must take into account the gender dimensions of violence. A key recommendation of the Study is to “address the gender dimension of violence; including through leadership roles by men and boys”. We can use the opportunity of the 51<sup>st</sup> CSW to highlight the recommendations of this study,

link it to the upcoming UN Study on Violence against Women and to particularly highlight the actions needed to be taken against violence against girls.

A traditionally harmful practice such as Female Genital Mutilation is a serious violent act against girls. **There is no excuse for harmful traditional practices**, there is no ground for them in religion, and we should strive to change attitudes and customs that perpetuate abuse. The good news is that attitudes are learned and can change; in fact human society is always in a situation of change. The adoption of a variety of human rights conventions by the international community, often under auspices of the United Nations, has led to dramatic changes in ending some of the deeply entrenched traditional practices that are harmful to children and women. Often the struggle against harmful practices has been started and led by women and girls from the communities most affected.

UNICEF together with other partners is working to eliminate harmful traditional practices. A Task Force on Harmful Practices has been established by the Executive Director in January 2006 with the aim of applying the last developments in social sciences to harmful practices and specifically to social norms harmful to children. An Academic Consultation was recently held in NYHQ which gathered seven universities from the States and Sweden and worked to bridge academic theory with the realities on the ground so as to influence policies and programming approaches aimed at improving the situation of children. A holistic approach is being taken to address the issue which includes work with the parents, the community and within the cultural environment to find a solution to this threat to girls' health and wellbeing.

Sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation are other forms of violence that affect a much higher percentage of girls than boys, to keep preventing these forms of violence it is important to create safe spaces and environments in the family, the school and community as this is where girls and boys live.

*“Our traditions, customs and norms support the men.. I hope it will change and make both boys and girls equal”. (13 year old)*

A protective environment is what should be the goal, where living in safety and dignity is at the center. This would ensure that children, specially girls are in school, laws are in place to punish the those who exploit children, governments take on their responsibility to fulfill children’s rights and together with the family create a safe and healthy environment, in the family, the community and society overall.

- **Looking at the girl child in especially vulnerable situations**

**Child marriage** is another traditional harmful practice that affects in particular adolescent girls and often leads them to leave school, early child birth and isolation from participation in activities directed to their age group in the community. Actions have to be taken to keep the young married girls in school and to delay their first pregnancy. It is important to work with their husbands, often much older men and their families in support of the married girls’ opportunity to education and participation.

**In emergencies and conflict situations** the vulnerability of young people, especially girls, is known to increase considerably in emergency and post emergency periods. As a consequence of their age and gender, adolescent girls can be at significant risk of gender-based violence, increased infection of HIV/AIDS, as well as abduction and recruitment into armed forces and groups. Harmful traditional and cultural practices against girls such as female genital mutilation and forced marriages may also increase during complex emergencies, further impacting on their health and well-being.

Special measures are needed to better reach this vulnerable group and also address their right to actively participate in peace and long-term development processes. Actively encouraging women and girls’ participation is a critical element of several international and organizational frameworks to which UN agencies, including UNICEF is committed, such as Security Council Resolution 1325, CEDAW, CRC, the Millennium Development Goals, etc.

As said by Safi, a young girl abducted by the rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo “*For three months I was held as a prisoner in their military camp. I was alive but not living. ...Everyday they raped me. Before going out to steal or kill they would rape me – sometimes one, sometimes three. They would return from killing and robbing villages and rape me again. I tried to escape. I didn’t get far before they caught me. They beat me everywhere on my body for a long time until I went unconscious.*”<sup>1</sup> Children’s horrific experiences of armed conflict have long lasting physical and psycho-social implications. The rights to survival, wellbeing and development of successive generations of children and youth are shadowed by the legacy of violence, making them vulnerable as victims of direct abuses as well as perpetrators of violent hostilities.

Adolescent girls and young women are among the most vulnerable to **HIV/AIDS** infections, in Sub-Saharan Africa 75% of young people infected with HIV are young women and adolescent girls. They are particularly vulnerable when in an abusive or male dominant relationship because they do not have autonomy to choose when and whether and with whom they will have sex. Studies from South Africa show that women who have a controlling or violent partner had a 50% higher HIV infection rate than other women. Sexual abuse in childhood, which disproportionately affects girls, tends to increase risky sexual behavior later in life. A key outcome of the recently held Conference on HIV/AIDS in Toronto is the strong linkage between HIV/AIDS and gender roles and relations. The conference raised the importance of reinforcing the interface between public health and women's rights. A positive feature was the consistency with which all the key speakers and plenary sessions highlighted the importance of promoting women's rights to tackle the increasing feminisation of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In a wider context where women and girls have very little control over their lives, and coercive sex and other forms of violence is an everyday reality, the discussions emphasised the importance of addressing sexual and gender-based violence as a vital piece in reducing women's and young girl's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS.

**Girls and boys must matter in migration policies and debates.** Migration contributes to development but the effects on migrant children must also be taken into account, It is necessary to

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<sup>1</sup> Safi’s Story: A Courageous Young Woman Moves Beyond her Past Experiences of Sexual Violence, Goma, DRC, 23/10/03. UNICEF Regional Office, Dakar.

identify different types of situations; children left behind by fathers or mothers or both, children that migrate with one parent, both or alone and the different types of migration such as labour migrants, trafficked children, foster children, refugees/asylum seekers, forced migrants, orphans from HIV/AIDS. Among actions to be taken is the collection of more statistics on the situation of migrant children, girls and boys, and their situation both in the sending as well as in the receiving countries. Gender sensitive migration policies are imperative to meet the different needs of the migrant populations.

- **Empowerment of girls**

***“Educate the girl child today** and liberate them from the bondage of discrimination in our societies. Education is freedom”. (21 year old)*

Universal Primary Education (MDG 2); research has revealed that violence against girls can stop them from going to school. The schools need to provide for good separate sanitary facilities for girls and boys, and good quality education. Where the school environment or the road to school are not safe, where girls are in danger of being raped, sexually assaulted, abused, and sexually harassed by classmates or teachers, or others along their way to school, then they most likely will not continue their education. Boys and men must be involved in how to act without using violence against girls and women. More work and study needs to be done regarding men’s and boy’s roles.

Studies show that the longer a girl stay in school the better are the prospects for her future; a girl with education will more likely marry at an older age, more likely have her first pregnancy after she finishes her education, has more chances of going through primary, secondary and even tertiary education, has a social network around her that makes her better prepared to protect herself and alert about gender based violence, a girl with formal education will have more opportunities as an adult woman to participate in both social, political and economic life. Making school a safe and high quality space for learning and participation, through child friendly schools and parent’s supportive involvement are important actions, as well as governments’ commitment to provide education for all.

**Promoting girls' participation** in the family, school and community has shown to have a positive effect on girls' self-esteem and capacity to protect themselves from violence. In order for the girls to participate in positive recreational and learning activities work must be done with parents to see the value and give the girls permission to participate as well as creating safe spaces in public places and meeting times that permits the girls to mobilize safely to the location of activities. It is important to hear the voices of girls and boys, how they understand the world, how they would like to be involved in their family, community and school.

- **Institutional arrangements to accelerate elimination of discrimination and violence against girls**

To ensure statistics and data that is disaggregated by gender and age is important in order to be able to conduct gender sensitive analysis of this information. Both quantitative and qualitative gender and age sensitive data is necessary and countries should be urged to integrate these into their national surveys and studies and build the capacity of the government in using gender analysis tools and indicators: This way girls and boys' living conditions can be mapped and we can better target the problems and solve them in favor of positive development opportunities for girls and boys and their families.

**Impunity** – The national legal systems, police and other law enforcement authorities often respond to sexual and gender based violence as unimportant crime and there is a tendency to blame the victims to have caused the violence done to them. According to international law, governments are responsible and have a duty to respond effectively to violence against girls, including rape. In reality perpetrators fail to be held accountable for their acts, perpetuating a culture of impunity for a crime that is endemic to many of the places in which we are working. Legal reform and putting the laws into practice are part of the actions urgently needed.

Finally, **the MDG's** cannot be reached if violence against girls and women is not addressed as violence against women and girls impedes social and economic development of countries, including

the opportunity to meet the set millennium development goals. We need to take this into account and have a human rights based approach with a strong gender component in order to do good programming.

One of the key dimensions of UNICEF's work has been the central role played by human rights treaties and the **strong complementarity and mutual supportive role of the CRC and CEDAW**. In turn, we have remained committed to bridge with and build upon the decisive leadership provided by CRC and CEDAW Committees – in promoting understanding of human rights provisions, in monitoring progress made by countries and societies as a whole, in recognizing governments' accountability for children and the essential role played by national institutions and civil society, and in translating international norms and commitments into a tangible reality for each and every girl.

Let me finish with the words of Isabella Kitari Feliciano, 18, local chapter leader of Girls' Education Movement, Juba, Southern Sudan:

***"I learned that day that my voice is strong and powerful. Now I want to use my voice to help other children go to school. I want to tell the world that education should be free; that it is the right of every child"***

Let us do the same as Isabella proposes ensure the rights of every child, thank you!