

Commission on the Status of Women

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Madam Chairperson,
Mr. President of ECOSOC,
Madam Deputy-Secretary-General,
Madam Chair of the CEDAW Committee,
NGOs Representatives,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to address the opening of this fifty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women, especially in the presence of our Deputy-Secretary-General, Asha-Rose Migiro, with whom we, senior staff of the United Nations, commit ourselves to work to ensure that all of us are held accountable for our gender goals.

I would first like to congratulate my colleagues in UNICEF, led by Ann Veneman, for The State of the World's Children 2007 report: Women and Children - The double dividend of gender equality. The title says it all: if we invest in women, we are also investing in children, especially the girl child. And if we invest in the girl child, we are investing in the mother and citizen of tomorrow. Investing in women and girls is one of the best investments a government can make.

As I speak, a woman in a developing country is about to give birth. If she and her newborn survive, the family and the community will display pride to count one additional member. Yet, if that member is a baby girl, the course of her life might differ drastically from that of a baby boy.

We at UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, welcome the priority theme of this year's session: "The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child".

No matter where a girl is born, she should be able to live free of discrimination and violence. She should be able to enjoy respect of her human rights and fundamental freedoms. When they created the United Nations more than 60 years ago, the founders proclaimed their faith in human rights, in the inherent dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women.

Over the years, these rights have been elaborated in declarations, plans of action, and Conventions, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and they have been articulated in national constitutions and laws.

And yet we are gathered here today because the ideal of every girl living in dignity, in freedom from fear and want, with equal opportunities and equal rights remains out of reach for millions of girls around the world.

Today far too many girls are denied an education. They are married as child brides, their dreams stolen from them before their very eyes.

Too many girls give birth before they are ready, putting their lives and the lives of their babies at risk. Far too many girls suffer from gender-based violence. And far too many are infected with HIV.

We are gathered here as representatives of the UN system, as representatives of government, of civil society and the private sector because we know the realities and want to see greater progress. Discrimination against the girl child is a serious human rights violation that harms all of us, beginning with the girl child herself.

Empowering girls through education is a priority. It helps girls build their self-esteem and self-confidence. It builds their capacities to know and fight for their rights. And it gives them lifetime tools to fulfill their aspirations and dreams and become driving forces for development and the real agents of change that our world needs.

We at UNFPA work closely with such countries to ensure that girls are valued and that the practice is banned.

Ladies and gentlemen,

All over the world, we see examples of how family, community and educational institutions -all charged with a protective mission- often jeopardize the safety of girls.

This is one of the many negative manifestations of gender discrimination and violence, not the least of which is a crushing of the human spirit. Another negative outcome is the spread of HIV and AIDS.

The role of gender based violence in increasing the vulnerability of girls and young women to HIV/AIDS must be urgently addressed. Without dedicated efforts, marginalized and disadvantaged girls will continue to bear a rising and disproportionate share of HIV infections. Promoting and protecting the rights of girls also protects them from HIV infection.

As we meet today, violence against women and girls, including rape as a weapon of war, is occurring on a massive and devastating scale in conflict and post-conflict situations around the world. Our response has to be commensurate to the problem. This is urgent given the fact that an estimated 40 per cent of child soldiers are girls who were forcibly recruited.

UNFPA appeals to countries to vigorously enact and enforce laws and regulations that address discrimination and violence against women and girls, and to advance gender equality and human rights, including the right to sexual and reproductive health. The way forward is laid out in internationally agreed instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the ICPD Programme of Action and the Beijing Platform for Action.

As we work together to deliver as One UN in support of national development, we must make human rights a priority. I am encouraged by the progress being made to mainstream a human rights-based approach in our work as a United Nations system. UNFPA will continue to champion UN reform that puts human rights, including the rights of the girl child, at the center of the JgpTD011.wee UN

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