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> Girl child empowerment: A challenge for all

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations

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opportunities by poor women or women in armed conflicts, for trafficked women either for sexual exploitation or the slave labour force; this is a highly profitable hidden economy<sup>2</sup>. In this context, what are the roads to empower girls? How do we diminish the vulnerable situation they are facing?

## School: empowerment key?

School access has been one of the standards of child policies. However, in Uruguay where there is universal access to school, the challenge is different. The quality of the education and avoiding dropouts are two important strands we can not miss in all the countries. In order to give quality education it is necessary to have resources and we need to take responsibility of that. In relation to dropouts, especially high school, we must debate the reasons that lead to taking this decision and what alternatives the society is offering to girls and boys who are not in the formal educational system. Teenage pregnancy seems to be one of the most relevant factors for school dropout; however few efforts are being made to help these girls to integrate their identities as mothers and students. Often changes in the educational system take their time, in that sense besides the access to formal education, we must find other ways to

On the international level we have participated in the Special Session on Children, Beijing + 5, Beijing +10, Cairo +10 and conferences related to the Millennium Development Goals. This kind of participation has allowed us to empower a lot of girls who return to their countries as points of reference of these items and have the ability to promote movements at the local level. As we said, each organization uses different strategies. In DESYR we like to be able to lobby our governors in seminars and conferences but also we promote impact activities to prevent these subjects from being only treated by a select group of people. We have done workshops in schools and high schools as peer educators and also urban interventions. From voluntarism, peer education is a very good initiative to mobilize and get closer to girls and teenagers. In several of our workshops participants have come to relate to us that they encouraged themselves to ask us and confess experiences they would not tell their doctors, gynaecologists or sexologists. Generational codes are really important to communicate with girl children, either to own the information or to report to us cases of violence or abuse they suffered or are suffering. In relation to the mass activities, we believe they are also very important and few years ago, with the support of Montevideo council we held a "Safe Pleasure Initiative". We gave away condom carrying cases which we call "condoneras." Each condonera contains one condom, information about HIV/AIDS, and a list of places where you can get condoms for free.

The condoneras are printed with one of two slogans: "I carry a condom," or "safe pleasure." They can be worn on your belt, on your keychain, or on your bag, where everyone can see them. Besides encouraging safe sex, carrying these condoneras gives adolescents and young people the opportunity to make a political statement. Whether you are a man or a woman, carrying these condoneras says, "I have a right to pleasure, as well as a responsibility to take care of my partner and myself." We gave away six hundred of these condoneras in Montevideo on December tenth, the International Day for Human Rights. Day and night we travelled around the city to places where young people congregate—bars, clubs, cafes—performing a street theatre piece starring an egg, a sperm, and a condom. As we travelled around the city, more and more young people joined in the performance. And at the end of the night, we had given away all the condoneras.

#### Challenges for those who take decisions

I think eradication of any form of girl child discrimination is a subject which concerns the whole society. The proper perspective about girl's rights has to penetrate all areas of society and for that matter we ha need to transform the UN into a coherent and integrated organization with a strong political proposal for the human rights framework.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Fourth World Conference on Women, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) gave an international juridical framework of reference to the fight for the individual's human rights.

Regrettably, in Latin America, structural conditions (external debt, negative effects of structural adjustment policies) added to the lack of political will, have limited their implementation. At the same time, conservatism has caused conference reviews to focus more on what has already been agreed to rather than moving forward on commitments already made by States

I believe we cannot delay the national and local implementation of the nineties agenda, especially that of CEDAW, the Beijing Platform For Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the Plan of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development. Without any doubt the implementation of these agendas are fundamental pillars to eradicate poverty, gender inequality and to decrease the rate of child and maternal mortality, in one phrase: the achievement of MDG's.

The United Nations should reorient its policies and its resources to the local level, especially to follow up on the implementation of local agreements, train state personnel about agreements and how to develop effective policies and reinforce local civil society for lobbying.

### **Governments: do your homework**

Governments must know the international instruments to be able to transform them into laws, programs and concrete services. It is necessary to have allied persons in different state institutions to achieve the crosscutting of the gender and rights perspective in every policy. The creation of specific organizations for girls' and womens' improvement has been of great help to place the subject in public policies. However, these organizations have a low place on the state pyramid, which is translated into few resources to carry out some actions. At the same time, these mechanisms are seen like the only ones responsible for implementing policies from this perspective and it relieves other state areas of their responsibilities to carry out specific policies for girls. The main objective must be the crosscutting of this perspective in every ministry. The outcomes will be sensitive concrete policies for structural inequalities and of course with the intention to transform it. This involves training judges, senators, policemen, government services staff. In relation to health system, the existence of specific health services for girls and women is really urgent. Girl children have the right to have responsible medical attention without parental help. They have to have friendly sexual and reproductive services to be listened to and informed of every option so they can decide, gradually in accordance with their age, about their own lives<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Inspired on Chapter 7 of ICPD PoA

### International and local civil society organization: push on top, push on bottom

In the nineties international conferences boosted the creation of national spaces for dialogue with the persons who participated on the international conferences. This allowed to have some influence on the government's agenda and a process which helped make many women's organizations more professional. However, the big challenge is to integrate more persons. For that matter it is necessary to change some methods of participation of many NGO's. If they really consider girl's and women's participation important, better feedback and a respectful intergenerational dialogue are necessary.

Besides that, as we have seen it is fundamental for civil society to participate in

contexts must be encouraged. The relationship between poverty, infancy and growth and development models must be also studied.

## Educational system: how to make changes faster

For the above mentioned reasons, I visualize different challenges for the Educational System. Firstly, train and make teachers and work staff aware about structural discriminations and some practices that girls are suffering in schools. Secondly, go deeper in the elaboration of non-sexist curricula<sup>4</sup> and focus on human rights and diversity. Thirdly, we need the inclusion of scientific sex education from the early years. Education in arts, music, expression and recreation is also important. Fourthly, schools should be integrated on its context, and have a close relationship with the existing services (polyclinics, club, etc). Fifthly, I maintain that children have a central part in the whole educational process. I refer for instance to consultation with the children about study plans, I mean the necessity of mechanisms where children can evaluate their teachers and can also interrogate them.

In conclusion, I think it is time to move from paper to practice. For that, we only need three things: allies, resources and political will.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Inspired on article 4.19 of ICPD PoA