

**Opening 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
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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 particularly thank Ms. Marta Santos Pais and her colleagues for hosting the meeting at the excellent facilities of the Innocenti Research Centre, and for making us feel so welcome.

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. 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 this topic.

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 on Children 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. 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. They 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,

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 Secretary-General's Study 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 in October 2006, provide complementing analyses of the problem of gender-based violence, its forms, scope and manifestations across the lifespan, including on the girl child, as well as the states' responsibility 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, and vulnerability in armed conflict 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.

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. 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 invisibility of 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

