

**UNICEF Statement by
Ms. Rima Salah, Deputy Executive Director
to the 49th Session of
the UN Commission on the Status of Women
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On behalf of the United Nations Children's Fund it is my great privilege to attend this 49th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women. A decade after the Fourth World Conference in Beijing, we have gathered here to review and appraise the progress made in fulfilling the commitments to the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action. And we are encouraged by the commitment of the governments and the civil society to the Beijing Platform for Action.

2005 is a year of accountability, for the International Community and the UN system, since we have to analyze progress and remaining challenges regarding the Beijing Platform for Action as well as the Millennium Development Goals.

As the United Nations lead agency for children, UNICEF is particularly concerned about the situation and rights of girls and therefore wants to call the world's attention to one of the twelve critical areas of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action -- the situation and rights of girls. A focus on girls is crucial to understanding the seamless relationship between women's and children's rights. First, because children's rights to survival, development, protection and participation cannot be achieved without the advancement of women's rights. Second, because gender-based discrimination begins in childhood, and it takes its toll across the entire life cycle.

Madame Chair, a decade after the meeting in Beijing, let us first acknowledge the advances made across the globe. Significant progress has been achieved in a number of the areas of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action: more girls than ever are in school, many countries have reviewed or developed legal frameworks to promote and protect women's and children's rights, partners have joined efforts to formulate national action plans to analyze and address gender-based discrimination.

However despite positive steps forward, we are still far from fulfilling the promises made in Beijing. Worldwide the majority of primary school aged children out of school continue to be girls. Although progress in raising enrolments and reducing the gender gap is being made in a number of regions much more is needed - particularly in regions where the gaps are the highest. The rising proportions of girls and young women worldwide living with HIV is another cause for deep concern. Evidence shows that this increase is due to many factors - but gender-based discrimination and gender based violence - are playing a major role in fuelling the spread of HIV/AIDS among women and girls, especially in conflict situations.

Rape, sexual exploitation and abuse are gross violations of the rights of girls and women. Over the past two decades, the use of rape and sexual violence has increased as a deliberate tactic of war - a way of demoralizing, humiliating and destabilizing entire communities and families.

Harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation and cutting are wide spread and 130 million women have gone through this harmful traditional practice, over the next decade 100 million girls will be married as children.

We know that the most effective means of addressing many of the most profound challenges to human development, including gender-based violence, is through educating girls. Educating girls creates manifold benefits which extend to both the individual and to society as a whole.

So now is the time to ask ourselves some tough questions. In spite of the clear evidence of the social and developmental benefits of girl's education, and the tremendous human and social cost of violence, in spite of proven strategies that get girls into school and ensure they stay and learn in quality educational environments, in spite of the ever-expanding partnerships and commitments at all levels - why is it that many girls are still systematically left out of school? And why is it that the silent "epidemic" of violence against women and girls is allowed to continue?

Madame Chair, UNICEF would like to take this opportunity to challenge the world to achieve the goals set out ten years ago at Beijing in view of the issues we have articulated here today. This is a challenge to development in all sectors – in both stable and unstable situations:

- **Governments must make girls' education a priority in their national programs and policies.**
- **The international community must honor its commitments to ensure that all countries with a credible education plan should be supported in order to secure implementation.**
- **States must hold perpetrators of sexual violence during armed conflict and those who authorize attacks accountable as war criminals, in violation of international law.**
- **International and national courts must have adequate resources and capacity to ensure gender-sensitive programmes for victim and witness protection, in order to more effectively prosecute those responsible for gender-based crimes.**
- **Governments must strengthen the participation and contribution of women, and groups promoting women and children, at national, regional and international levels.**

In conclusion, Madame Chair, UNICEF takes this opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to the achievement of the Beijing Platform for Action and the rights of women and girls and to gender equality. We also hope that the results of this meeting will be reflected and addressed in the forthcoming high-level Millennium Review.