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**Key note address by H.E. Mr. Mogens Lykketoft,
President of the 70th Session of the General Assembly,
At the High-level Luncheon on Investing in Adolescent Girls: A
prerequisite for Achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable
Development**

Honourable Ministers, Under Secretary-General Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin, Excellences, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon to you all.

Here at the UN, we do not shy away from using words like transformative or catalytic; game-changing or revolutionary; but if ever there was a subject that merits such labels, it is that of empowering adolescent girls to fulfil their potential.

By placing the rights of women and girls at the very heart of the 2030 Agenda, the international community embraced the transformative power of all women and all girls.

Collectively, we delivered a clear message to the world that the future we want – one of prosperity and peace in a sustainable world – will only be achieved if every woman and girl enjoys full gender equality and if all legal, social and economic barriers to their empowerment have been removed.

The 600 million adolescent girls in our world today are fundamental to that change.

This is a group with enormous potential.

But it is also one that is often marginalized and held back by prejudice, discrimination and horrific human rights violations.

For many girls and especially for those living in poverty, adolescence marks a time of heightened vulnerability.

In developing countries, in particular, an adolescent girl can be at great risk of being:

- pulled out of school before graduating;
- married off before she is ready;
- pressured to bear children before her body is fully developed.

She may also be:

- highly vulnerable to becoming infected with HIV;
- the victim of socially or even statutorily tolerated violence;
- subject to long working hours under dangerous conditions;
- given few opportunities and choices;
- and guaranteed little or no say in decisions that affect her.

So as governments and international partners review their plans and programmes in light of the 2030 Agenda, what should they do to reduce these risks and empower adolescent girls?

A first step would be to implement the internationally agreed commitments such as the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and its review conferences.

It recalls that protection, promotion and fulfilment of human rights are necessary preconditions for improving the dignity and wellbeing of women and adolescent girls and for empowering them to exercise their reproductive rights and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

A second step would be to invest in adolescent girls' right to education.

If adolescent girls stay in school, stay healthy, become earners and enter the labour market before they start a family, they will be more likely to support their families in overcoming generations of poverty.

We must therefore advance towards gender parity in terms of both access to quality education and completion.

We must provide comprehensive sexuality education, consistent with the evolving capacities of young people.

We must enable the reintegration of pregnant girls and young mothers into education at all levels and reduce adolescent pregnancy.

We also need to provide information and education to help eliminate harmful traditional practices such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation and cutting.

And a third step would be to tackle gender stereotypes head-on and to get men and boys on board, to turn nascent supporters into a bold force for gender equality. We cannot avoid the hard questions:

Why should gender-based violence be accepted as the norm?

Why is it not ok for men to show fear or weakness; or to take on the role of primary care-giver? And why should others control the bodies and the futures of women and girls?

To counter these harmful stereotypes, we must provide men, women, boys, girls, adolescents and young people with mentoring and skills to build healthy social relationships – relationships that promote tolerance and diversity, honour non-violent masculinities and emphasise self-respect and the values and practice of gender equality.

Bringing this change about however – protecting human rights, ensuring access to quality education, overcoming destructive gender norms – will not happen without leadership and investment.

The international community must now move from talking about gender equality to accelerating efforts and increasing investments in gender equality, and especially in adolescent girls.

It's the right thing to do and it is the smart thing to do.

It is a social and economic imperative and key to achieving the SDGs.

But to do so, we need all actors on board.

We need to move beyond action from experts, governments or the UN in the traditional sectors.

And that is the discussion I hope we will have today.

I am very happy to co-host this lunch today with UNFPA as they, over the past decades, have been a crucial partner in working with governments and other actors to empower adolescent girls and

provide access to health, including access to sexual reproductive health information, education, commodities and services.

But UNFPA and the UN cannot do it alone. We all have the potential to impact positively on the lives of adolescent girls, to create the conditions for the most promising future of these young women.

I am therefore very pleased that we have many different actors around the table today – government, private sector, the UN, civil society, academia, media and not least the adolescent girls themselves.

And I hope we can focus on building new alliances, identifying investment opportunities and sharing lessons learned these past few decades.

Ladies and gentlemen, if we equip them with skills and opportunities, and if we guarantee them lives of safety and dignity, 600 million adolescent girls will take big steps forward in their own lives and that of their families, help jumpstart economic growth spur innovation and action for a better future, for people and planet.

This is a remarkable opportunity; one which we must not let pass.

I therefore look forward to engaging with you all in today's discussion.

Thank you and 'bon appetit'.