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PANEL I

Key Policy initiatives to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child

Written statement*

submitted by

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**Summary of the Expert Group Meeting on the Elimination of All Forms of
Discrimination and Violence against the Girl Child
(Florence, Italy, 25-28 September 2006)**

Madame Chair, distinguished guests and participants, fellow panelists, and colleagues:

Good morning, I have the honor to present a summary of the outcome of the Expert Group Meeting on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child.

1. The Expert Group Meeting was organized with a view for participants to share lessons learned and critically examine the issue, and to provide concrete policy recommendations for governments, the United Nations and other relevant stakeholders.

2. The Meeting was organized by the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) in collaboration with UNICEF and hosted by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Center in Florence, Italy, in September 2006. It was attended by over 40 participants, including 15 independent experts and 19 observers from around the world.

3. The Meeting was structured around four main conceptual issues related to the girl child: **(i) protection, (ii) girls in especially vulnerable situations, (iii) empowerment, and (iv) institutional arrangements to accelerate elimination of discrimination and violence against the girl child**.

4. The Expert Group identified some underlying causes for the discrimination and violence against girls. We concluded that:

- Firstly, people in the society—men and women, girls and boys alike—internalize gender biases and stereotypes and rigid gender roles that place girls on the lowest rung of the hierarchy in family and society. This internalization, reflected in traditional practices and everyday behavior, causes people to tolerate the discrimination and violence against girls or ignore what goes on behind other people's closed doors. Because acts of violence and discrimination against girls are treated as a "private matter," girls' plight becomes socially invisible and girls continue to be vulnerable to abuse.

- Secondly, the unsupportive, dis-empowering and disabling environment begins at home and in school, and extends from the village to national and international levels. The very duty bearers charged with protecting the rights of girls—including parents, siblings, guardians, teachers or law enforcement officers—are often implicated in various forms of violence against girls. Societies' acceptance and indifference lay behind the impunity for crimes against girls. At times girls' rights violations are committed in the name of "culture."

- Thirdly, the macro-economic and political factors such as poverty, globalization, migration, war and conflict, present additional challenges. Girls

are particularly vulnerable when removed from familiar settings and support networks. When society break downs in the midst of war and conflict, girls are at an extremely high risk of violence both from the dangers and brutality of war and from the reinforcement of traditions and customs that treat girls and women as property to control or destroy.

5.   Given the complex and multi-faceted nature of the problem, there is an urgent need for a more holistic, rights-based approach. Governments, the private sector, communities and families must be accountable for the protection of the girls' rights. Attitude change is an essential part of the solution. It is particularly important to engage men and boys in the process so they understand and reflect on their own values, and find ways to promote a dialogue and empathy between the two sexes in society. Understanding how masculinity and femininity are defined by people in society is a step toward solving the problem of discrimination and violence against girls.

6.   Existing international human rights instruments provide a solid framework and accountability mechanisms for eliminating violence and discrimination against girls. Recent inter-governmental processes and their follow-up starting with the Beijing Platform of Action in 1995 clearly reflect the international consensus on the rights of the girl child. International Conventions have been widely ratified and adopted. Yet, girls still disproportionately bear widespread and systematic discrimination and the worst human rights abuses in childhood and adolescence. Why?

7.   Partly because international legal and policy frameworks have not been adequately and effectively implemented at the local and grassroots levels. Key Conventions, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the ILO Conventions on the Minimum Age for Employment and on Worst Forms of Child Labor have not yet been incorporated into national organic laws. Or, national laws exist but enforcement is weak. Or harmful civil and customary laws that infringe on girls' rights are still in use.

8.   With this in mind, it is now time to focus on the implementation of policies and standards—to ensure that laws and policies are not only enacted, but also systematically enforced to protect girls' rights. *Empowerment* and *participation* must go hand in hand with protection, and by *protection*, we mean "protection *of rights*," not merely "protection of the girls themselves" as some sort of property. Active participation of girls and boys is key to the protection of their own rights and development.

9.   It is usually difficult to identify the girls facing violence and discrimination because in most instances the violence and discrimination happen out of public view or are regarded by families and communities as a "normal" or even an "inevitable" part of life. Many of them are "invisible" in the public consciousness and in research and statistics.

10.   The Florence Expert Group identified seven groups of girls who are currently among the most underserved and neglected. These groups face multiple forms of abuse and rights violations due to their low status, high levels of stigma, the nature of

their work and livelihoods, their environment, and their enforced seclusion, and, at times, being held in detention or captivity. These seven groups are:

- **Girls facing harmful social and traditional practices**, including those experiencing or being forced to undergo female genital mutilation/cutting and those at risk of child marriage. Included also are those never been born due to sex-selective abortion and female infanticide.
- **Child mothers and girl heads of household**. This group is shockingly large, including child mothers as a result of early marriage, rape and sexual exploitation, and forced marriage to members of armed forces and groups and girls who due to various circumstances become *de facto* heads of the household.
- **Girls in the worst forms of child labor** as defined by the ILO Convention on Worst Forms of Child Labor. This includes the millions of girls in child domestic labor, girls affected by slavery-like practices, and girls forced or recruited to be with fighting forces.
- **Girls facing health issues**, for example, girls with limited access to reproductive health information and/or services and girls suffering from obstetric fistula in some parts of the world.
- **Girls infected with and affected by HIV and AIDS**.
- **Refugee, asylum-seeking and internally displaced girls** as a result of war and conflict.
- **Girls in marginalized groups**, including girls in pastoral and nomadic minority groups, lesbian girls, girls with disability, and girls in detention.

11.   Due to intensified advocacy and action, governments and non-governmental organizations are becoming increasingly aware of some of these groups of girls and are beginning to develop specific policies and programs to help them.

12.   At the Florence Meeting, we learned that good programs do exist—for example, programs in various parts of the world reaching out to out-of-school girls, girl domestic workers and young married girls to provide them support, education and skills they need, or programs that help boys to question the traditional male socialization as part of an effort to reduce risks of HIV/AIDS infection, violence and unwanted pregnancy. Detailed examples are in the full EGM report and in individual experts' papers available on DAW website. The challenge is to scale up these innovative programs.

13.   The top 10 recommendations of the Expert Group to address discrimination and violence against girls are:

- **Adopt an integrated and rights-based approach to the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child.** For countries that have not done so, they should ratify key international instruments such as CRC, CEDAW and its Optional Protocol, ILO Conventions No. 138 on Minimum Age for Admission to Employment and No. 182 on Worst Forms of Child Labor, and the Trafficking Protocol (the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Crime).

There should also be more linkages and synergy among existing human rights instruments and their bodies, in particular between CRC and CEDAW.

- **Bring national and local legal standards in line with international standards and make sure that these standards are implemented at the sub-national and local levels.** Governments must repeal all existing laws that discriminate against women and the girl child, such as laws on inheritance, property ownership, divorce, and minimum age for marriage. Law enforcement generally needs to be stepped up, along with formulation of national and local policies, resource allocations and necessary programs.

- Effective policymaking and programming require accurate data. There is a need to **increase support and funding to gender-responsive research to identify groups of girls at high risk of discrimination and violence, using a life-cycle approach.** Many groups of girls facing violence and discrimination are not properly counted. Often data collected are not properly disaggregated and not properly analyzed. This is in part due to lack of gender sensitivity among researchers and program staff. Research should be gender-responsive in design, methodology and data collection. To generate more gender-and context-specific information, the data should be disaggregated by vital indicators such as age, sex, marital status, family characteristics, ethnicity, geographical origin, and so on. More investment should be made to train program staff to conduct better gender analysis and gender mainstreaming.

- **Identify and give special attention to groups of girls at high risk of severe and multiple forms of discrimination and violence in policies, legislation and programming**.

- Protection and empowerment are two sides of the same coin. **Girls' rights need to be prioritized and empowerment should be a critical facet of the protection of girls' rights**. Education is among the most important investments for the empowerment of girls. Governments must ensure girls' access to education and training to acquire skills that will equip them for decent and dignified work and livelihood. The curricula should be gender-sensitive, and a safe and productive learning environment should be created for girls.

- **Commit and sustain long-term investment in targeted and innovative programs to promote the empowerment of girls.** More work and investment are needed in fields such as quality education for girls, nutrition for early growth and development, sexual and reproductive health services, mentorship programs, legal advocacy, and action against exploitative and child labor. Programming should build upon local capacities and ownership, and should take into account the particular needs of the specific group of girls. Investment in institutionalization and long-term programs has implications for sustainable interventions and eventual results. We urge donors to reconsider the tendency to favor short-term programs, for which success is measured by sheer numbers. Instead, we ask them to consider the needed sustainability and the long-term impact that are not easily measurable in the short term.

- **Ensure participation and empowerment of girls by providing safe spaces**, in family, school, community, workplace and other spaces. Safe spaces for girls are ones in which girls can feel safe and also empowered. They can be girls-only or mixed-sex, and address girls' needs and priorities. A range of youth-serving initiatives, such as youth centers, peer education programs, family and life skills programs, are good examples. Girls with particular needs require special spaces that cater to their needs, such as married girls, young mothers, child workers, girls affected by HIV/AIDS, girls with disabilities, victims of sexual exploitation and abuse, and girls affected by armed conflict, who often have difficulties accessing normal services due to their special situations.

- **Promote public debates and zero-tolerance on gender-based discrimination and violence.** Governments, civil society and the media should do more to sensitize the public about the negative impact of discrimination and violence on both girls and society in general. Public debates should be promoted about negative gender attitudes and practices, including those justified by religion or tradition. The media should better portray gender-equal and non-violent values, and avoid degrading and discriminatory messages related to girls and women.

- **Involve men and boys in efforts to fight against discrimination and violence against women and girls.** Attitudinal and behavioral changes start at home and in the community, and both male and female members of society play a key role. Progressive traditional, religious or community leaders, and male role models, young and old, should be engaged in moving the agenda of girls' rights and gender equality forward. Spaces should be created for girls and boys, and women and men, to have a dialogue and find the common ground in questioning traditional views about gender equality, and work together to eliminate gender-based discrimination and violence.

- **Develop the capacity of individuals and institutions working with girl children, in both preventive and rehabilitative programs.** Education and training on girls' and women's rights, as well as gender equality principles, should be provided to families, teachers, social, health and humanitarian aid workers, youth, women, community leaders, and employers of girls, to increase awareness and understanding of girls' rights, to strengthen their capacity to empower girls, and to create community and social networks capable of preventing and responding to girls' rights violations. Rights training and psycho-social training on how to deal with girls who have been raped or suffered extreme violence should be required for staff of law enforcement, judicial agencies, and local NGOs. Professionals and community activists should also be equipped with the skills to intervene at the family and community level on particular issues, such as child marriage, female genital mutilation/cutting and other harmful traditional practices, sexual abuse, domestic violence, and child labor exploitation.

14.   In the full EGM report you can find specific recommendations on the application of international human rights instruments and legislative and policy reforms, on programming, implementation and follow-up, as relevant for all

stakeholders: Member States, United Nations entities, donor agencies, social partners including organizations working directly with children, NGOs, the private sector, the media, and civil society organizations.

15.   Everybody needs to be involved for the efforts to eliminate discrimination and violence against girls to succeed.

Thank you for your attention.