

Commission on the Status of Women

Fifty-first session

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Keynote statement

Ms. Dubravka Šimonovič

Chairperson

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

**to launch the general debate on the priority theme of “The elimination
of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child”**

26 February 2007

Chairperson,
Distinguished delegates and participants,

It is my honour and privilege, as the Chairperson of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women to contribute to the launching of the general debate at the fifty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women, on the priority theme of “The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child”.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women has been ratified or acceded to by 185 States. It is the only legally binding international instrument to prohibit all forms of discrimination against women committed by public authorities or by any person or organisation in the full range of civil, political, economic, social and cultural areas, and covering both public and private life. The Optional Protocol to the Convention, under which the Committee considers communications submitted by or on behalf of individuals or groups of individuals who claim to be victims of a violation of rights in the Convention and inquires into grave or systematic violations of the Convention’s provisions, now has 85 States parties.

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women welcomed the invitation by the Commission to contribute to the discussion on its priority themes for 2007 and 2008. The Committee discussed this invitation at its thirty-sixth session in July 2006 and was of the view that its contribution could consist of an analysis of the theme concerned drawing from the concluding comments and overall experiences and findings.

Distinguished participants,

I would like to start with a general point: the Convention focuses on the rights of *all* women to be free from discrimination. We all know that discrimination against women does not start with the age of a woman’s maturity but at her birth or even before.

All States parties to the Convention have an obligation to pursue *without delay* a policy of elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and to ensure the *practical realization* of the principle of the equality of women and men, as stated in article 2 of the Convention. As such, implementation of the Convention in its entirety impacts directly and indirectly on the rights and well-being of women of all ages, including girl children and young women.

Furthermore, the Convention makes it clear that the elimination of discrimination against women must be pursued *by all appropriate means*. This means that States parties are required to take legislative, policy and all other appropriate measures to ensure compliance with their treaty obligations.

The Committee – which this year commemorates its twenty-fifth anniversary – regularly monitors the way in which States parties adhere to these overall obligations in regard to women. I will highlight aspects of the Committee’s work on the elimination of

discrimination and violence against the girl child and young women as reflected in the Committee's constructive dialogue with the State parties, country specific concluding comments, and general recommendations.

Chairperson,

The Convention (articles 2 f and 5 a) pays specific attention to the impact of stereotypes on the achievement of equality for women. It requires modification of social and cultural patterns of conduct of women and men, and the elimination of practices based on the idea of the inferiority or superiority of either of the sexes. Such stereotypes often restrict rights and opportunities for girls from a very early age, and affect their education, health, reproductive roles, and participation in public life and decision-making. Those discriminatory stereotypes take different forms in different countries but in all those instances, the Committee takes the firm view that States parties have a clear obligation under the Convention to change such practices and to act forcefully and creatively to eliminate such discrimination de jure as well as de facto.

The Convention requires that States parties ensure equal rights of women with men in the field of education at all levels. Compliance encompasses girls' and women's equal access to education and training at all levels, as well as the quality of education they receive. This provision is of primary importance to girls and young women, yet the Committee continues to see lower levels of girls' education, and large gender disparities in school enrolment rates of girls and boys, almost always to the detriment of girls. Girls' high dropout rates, owing to a series of factors including early and forced marriage and pregnancy also persist. Likewise, discriminatory stereotypes are found in school curricula and textbooks that often project inferior roles of women and girls.

The Committee consistently emphasizes the role of education as a human right and as a basis for the empowerment of girls and women, and regularly calls for a range of actions by States to enhance compliance with article 10 of the Convention. In some instances, legislative measures are required to ensure de jure equality. More commonly, and also in line with the MDG goals, policy and programmatic measures are necessary to achieve universal primary education for girls and to eliminate gender disparity in school enrolment rates at all levels. The Committee also calls for awareness raising measures, to overcome traditional attitudes that constitute obstacles to girls' education and for measures to ensure equal access of girls and young women to all levels of education, to retain girls in school and ensure that pregnant girls stay in school during pregnancy and return after delivery. Curricula reform and enhanced teacher training, incentives for young women to enter traditional male-dominated fields of study are other steps the Committee regularly recommends so as to eliminate discrimination against girls and women in education.

Importantly, the Committee emphasizes the consequences of girls' educational choices for their later opportunities and chances in the labour market as well as for their equal participation in public life and decision-making at all levels. The Committee also

tackles discrimination and inequality of girls and young women in the area of work, where it has flagged for example, the exploitation of girls in domestic work, and related consequences for girls' education.

Chairperson,

The Convention addresses women's health in general and also focuses on reproductive health and services related to pregnancy, confinement and the post-natal period. In its general recommendation 24 on article 12, the Committee clarifies that women's health must be addressed throughout women's lifespan, and thus must also focus on girls and young women. It highlights particular vulnerabilities faced by girls and adolescents, and draws attention to unequal power relations and their impact on women's and girls' ability to enjoy health-related rights.

Among the issues the Committee regularly raises with States parties under this article is lack of, or limited access by women and girls to adequate health-care services, family planning services and reproductive health services for girls and boys.

The Committee carefully examines teenage pregnancy rates and early motherhood, as these present significant obstacles to girls' educational opportunities and economic empowerment and recommends the adoption of appropriate measures for their prevention and reduction. It also examines related issues, such as availability to young women of family planning and contraceptive means, and of sex education. The Committee stresses the need for sex education for girls and boys. It recommends the implementation of awareness-raising initiatives on women's health, including sexual and reproductive health and rights that target adolescent girls.

It assesses rates of HIV/AIDS infection in adolescent girls and requests that measures be taken to eliminate discrimination against women and girls infected with HIV/AIDS. It calls for the eradication of harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation that constitute a violation of the human rights of a girl child or young woman.

Chairperson,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Article 16, paragraph 2 of the Convention specifically prohibits marriage of a child, and also requires that a minimum age for marriage be specified, including in legislation. The Committee elaborated the scope of this article further in its general recommendation 21 on equality in marriage and family relations. It considers that the minimum age for marriage should be 18 years for both man and woman.

The Committee consistently addresses situations where the minimum legal age for marriage for girls is below 18 years. The Committee without exception requests that States raise the minimum legal age of marriage for girls in order to bring it into line with article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and with article 16, paragraph 2, of

the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Committee's general recommendation 21.

The Committee calls for awareness-raising and other measures to ensure compliance with such laws, and to combat stereotypes so that a woman can indeed exercise her right freely to choose her partner. The Committee also points to the importance of the registration of all marriages as a means for enhancing compliance with minimum age of marriage, and the protection of the rights of children, as well as to establish equality between the partners.

Chairperson,

Violence against women and girls is a violation of human rights that persists in every country in the world. The recent in-depth study of the Secretary-General on violence against women clearly highlights the many different forms and manifestations such violence takes, and the study on violence against children further enhances our knowledge about the plight of millions of children.

The issue of violence against women remains a concern the Committee has to raise consistently with each reporting State. In its general recommendation 19 of 1992 the Committee has clarified that violence against women is covered by the Convention. It gives detailed guidance on the obligation of the State to act with *due diligence* to prevent violence against women, to protect its victims and to prosecute and punish the perpetrators. It also elaborates the linkages between violence against women and implementation of other provisions of the Convention. This general recommendation pays significant attention to the many forms of violence that are perpetrated against girls and young women, and also elaborates on the risk factors and particular vulnerabilities to violence this age group continues to encounter.

High prevalence of violence against women and girls, sexual exploitation of young girls in primary and secondary schools and the persistence of illegal practices such as sex-selective abortion, female infanticide and the non-registration and abandonment of female children have been highlighted by the Committee, as has the vulnerability of young girls who migrate as domestics to urban areas and are subject to exploitation by their employers, including sexual abuse.

The Committee places high priority on the need for comprehensive measures to address all forms of violence against women and girls. Such a comprehensive approach should include specific legislation on violence against women, and its effective implementation, as well as specific legislation where certain forms of violence persist such as pre-natal sex selection, or female genital mutilation. Other elements of a comprehensive approach include policies and action plans, awareness-raising and capacity-building efforts for different groups of public officials and the general public, as well as services for victims of violence.

Trafficking of women and girls and exploitation of prostitution of women and girls are addressed in article 6 of the Convention. The Committee consistently calls for special efforts to prevent violence against and exploitation of young women and girls and regularly calls for targeted interventions to respond to the specific needs of girls and young women. It calls for the effective prosecution of offenders; support to girl victims of trafficking, and for an end to the exploitation of young prostitutes, or of girls working as domestics and are victims of sexual and economic abuse and exploitation.

Chairperson,

In all areas discussed, the Committee is increasingly concerned about intersectional discrimination of particular groups of women including girls that are also discriminated on the other grounds such as race, ethnicity, or because they are migrants, or live in rural or remote areas.

The Committee is also increasingly focusing on the impact of measures taken as many States now have been party to the Convention for extended periods of time. As significant gaps remain worldwide in the full implementation of the Convention, it is imperative that all States parties ensure that the Convention is integrated into national law and is fully applicable in domestic legal system and accelerate compliance with the Convention through regular and timely reporting, constructive dialogues with the Committee and follow-up to the Committee's concluding comments. Active cooperation with NGOs working in this field is also recommended to all States parties.

Data and research are essential as lack of such data is also an impediment to the State's own impact evaluation of measures taken and results achieved in the actual situation of women across their life cycle and in tracking trends over time. States need to monitor, through measurable indicators, the impact of laws, policies and programmes to promote gender equality and progress achieved towards the realization of women's and girls' de facto equality.

At this session, the Commission will pay specific attention to the discrimination of girls. Much remains to be done in order to ensure that each girl's future is determined not by stereotypes and prejudices, but by each one's capacities, hopes and aspirations, and the full respect of their human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Committee will continue to make its contribution to this common goal.

Thank you.