

**Opening remarks by Ms Carolyn Hannan, Director
United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women**

**At the
Second International Helvi Sipilä Seminar 2007
GIRLS SHAPING OUR FUTURE
UN New York, 1 March 2007**

Madame Moderator,
Distinguished participants,

I am honoured to make opening remarks at this Second International Helvi Sipilä Seminar. I express the appreciation of the Division for the Advancement of Women for this initiative. I thank the Finnish Federation of University Women/International Federation of University Women and the Finnish UNIFEM Committee for their efforts in organizing this seminar. I have been asked to convey to you the warm greetings of Minister Helvi Sipilä.

The Commission encourages the organization of parallel events as a means to enrich its work. In the resolution adopted on its methods of work last year, the Commission noted with appreciation "...the programme of side events held on the occasion of the sessions of the Commission". This year there is a dynamic programme of around 250 events - panels, workshops and training activities focused on critical issues for gender equality and empowerment of women. We particularly welcome those focused on the priority theme of the girl child, such as this annual International Helvi Sipilä Seminar.

I am certain that the theme of the 51st session of the Commission - the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child - is dear to the heart of Minister Sipilä. In her long career in the United Nations and in other contexts, Minister Sipilä advocated for the rights of girls. This was evident in her long involvement with the International Girls Scouts organization, which gave her the opportunity to learn at first hand about the situation of girls around the world. In the UN context, Minister Sipilä gave priority attention to the issue of female genital mutilation, which is still very much on the international agenda, including at this session of the Commission.

To set the context for ensuring that girls are empowered to contribute effectively to shaping the future, requires concerted efforts to address discrimination and violence they face. The report of the Secretary-General submitted to the Commission, as well as the outcomes of the Expert Group Meeting and an on-line discussion which supported the preparation of this report, have clearly illustrated that discrimination and violence against the girl child persist around the world, despite progress in raising awareness about the rights of the girl child and the detrimental impact of violations of these rights on girls themselves, and their families and communities and society as a whole.

Girls face many forms of discrimination, including in access to and quality of health care, education and economic opportunities. There are many forms of violence against girls, including sexual violence and harmful traditional practices detrimental to their health and well-being. Girls are also more likely than boys to be victims of trafficking for reasons of economic and sexual exploitation. Son preference persists in many societies, leading to sex-selective abortions, female infanticide and distorted sex-ratios.

Girls may be forced to withdraw from school in order to take on a large share of domestic and child-rearing duties. Millions of school-age girls around the world, some as young as 5 years old, work in domestic service outside the home, where they are exposed to discrimination, violence and abuse.

Up to 140 million women and girls today have experienced female genital mutilation/cutting, and a further 2-million girls are estimated to be at risk of undergoing the procedure each year.

Globally, 36 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 years were married or in union before they reached 18 years of age. Such early or childhood marriages can have extremely negative consequences for young girls, including early pregnancy and childbirth. Girls between the ages of 15 and 19 are twice as likely to die during pregnancy or childbirth as women in their twenties. The risk is five times greater for girls under 15.

The situation of girls is adversely affected by poverty, armed conflicts and HIV/AIDS, and in these contexts girls are at particular risk of sexual and economic exploitation. Girls and young women today suffer new and emerging forms of violence, such as date rape and violence linked to the Internet.

A number of issues emerge as critical for eliminating discrimination and violence against girls. It is a disturbing fact that girls are often most at risk in the very spaces where they should be safe, at the hands of those individuals and institutions charged with their protection - in the family, community, and in educational institutions.

Much discrimination and violence against girls, especially girls in high-risk situations, remains invisible, masked by national level statistics. Some groups of girls are particularly at risk: adolescents, migrants, orphans, girls with disabilities, refugee girls, girls in rural areas and girls living in detention. Adolescent girls aged 10 to 14 are at particularly high risk of discrimination and violence, especially girls living outside the protective structures of family and schools, heading households, at risk of early marriage, or girls already married.

It is very clear that breaking the cycle of discrimination and violence requires the empowerment of girls. Actions to ensure that girls become empowered to shape our

futures include girl-targeted programmes that offer age-appropriate and comprehensive information and services, such as education on girls' rights and reproductive health; vocational training to facilitate economic independence; and tools and activities that build self-awareness and self-esteem.

Increasing girls' access to education and ensuring the gender-sensitivity of educational settings, methods, content, materials and teachers and administrators is critical for their empowerment. Encouraging girls to pursue disciplines traditionally dominated by boys, such as science, engineering and technology, is another important element in girls' empowerment.

Experience shows that "safe spaces" are critical for providing opportunities for girls to develop important life skills, including leadership capacities; build friendship networks; learn about and defend their rights; develop a positive self-image; and make responsible and informed decisions on matters affecting their lives.

Boys must be sensitized at an early stage to develop respect for the rights of women and girls. Adolescent boys should be provided with opportunities to engage in constructive dialogue on gender identities and roles, to have positive interactions with girls, and to receive training and sensitization on stereotypical attitudes and behaviour, sexual and reproductive health and HIV/AIDS.

A critical challenge is the fact that many key stakeholders, including policy makers, service providers, communities and families—and even girls themselves—are not always fully aware of girls' rights.

A strong global policy and legal framework is in place which should promote and protect the rights of girls. But many gaps and challenges to full implementation at national level persist. Stereotypical attitudes and behaviours impede the full implementation of legislative and policy frameworks.

Girls remain invisible in many national policies and programmes and critical issues - such as child domestic work, early and forced marriage, sexual abuse and trafficking, remain unaddressed. Adequate legislation at national level to promote and protect the human rights of girls is often lacking.

It is too often presumed that general references to "women and girls", "boys and girls" and "children, including in the context of Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), will suffice to ensure attention to girls; unfortunately the reality is that the needs and priorities of girls remain unaddressed.

Your focus today is a very positive and constructive one – ensuring that girls can contribute to shaping the future. I hope that your discussions will put forward new ideas on addressing some of the challenges raised in the report of the Secretary-General to the

Commission and in the excellent discussions in the high-level roundtables and the expert panels held in the Commission earlier this week.

Thank you.