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***Need for action to eliminate all forms of discrimination
and violence against girls***

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations

Are girls (still) being discriminated against in Europe? Is there a need for special focus on girls in countries other than emerging and developing countries? Does gender-specific discrimination of girls still exist? An expertise of the German Youth Institute commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth indicates fields in which the situation of girls in Europe deserves special attention. These include vocational and professional training, preparation for political representation, and girls' health and physical experience. Contraception for teenagers is also a problem in some countries. The same applies to access to the new media. Particular attention needs to be given to opportunities for girls who are subject to multiple discrimination. These include: girls living in poverty, girls without school-leaving qualifications, girls with an immigrant background and girls with handicaps.

Vocational and professional training

Throughout Europe, school education for girls is now broadly similar to that for boys. In some states, girls are now even reaching a higher educational level than boys. In Germany, for example, more girls pass their university-entry qualifications than boys. However, in many European states, there is a marked segmentation of the vocational and professional training into 'female' and 'male occupations'. The same also applies to universities. In engineering courses, young women are markedly underrepresented in many states. Conversely, in medical and nursing colleges in Germany, only 20% of the students are male. Due to country-specific educational systems, it is difficult to compare the degrees of segmentation that exist. However, where it is possible to make a distinction between dual and purely school-based education and training, it is seen that more boys than girls attend business-related training courses. In comparison with purely school-based education and training, such courses provide payment even during the training period, as well as advantages during the transition to work. Scrutinizing and revising careers counselling and vocational/professional training structures, with a view to ensuring equality of opportunity, might lead to improvements in conditions for girls during their training and might improve their long-term income prospects in many countries in Europe.

Political representation

Both in Germany and in other European states, the social and political involvement of girls *while they are at school* does not appear to be any less marked than that of boys. However, differences appear outside of the school and after schooling has been completed: young women articulate an interest in politics less often and follow political reporting in the media less regularly. EU-wide, girls are also organized in clubs and associations less often than boys. There are differences in the ways that girls and boys regard the effectiveness of potential political activity (voting, getting media attention, joining a party, boycotting certain companies when shopping, etc.), and they participate in such activities to different extents. The corresponding gender differences vary from country to country, however.

Although the early and equal involvement by girls – in schools councils, for example is very promising, it is by no means certain that it will be possible to abolish gender discrepancies in the political representation of women and men among adults in the foreseeable future. A reorientation of political education, with new gender-specific offers and mentoring programmes, might be able to motivate girls to become involved in political work more strongly than previously. Furthermore, there is a need for the youth organisations of the political parties to develop a new political culture involving girls and young women.

Access to the new media

Computer skills and access to the Internet are becoming increasingly important for participation in politics, business, and society, for both men and women. It is therefore important for all girls to have access to the Internet appropriate for their age and to acquire computer skills. In 2001, the proportion of households with Internet access varied in Europe between 10% in Greece and 69% in Sweden. However, the proportion of young people, and in particular the proportion of girls, who have Internet access depends not only on computer access at home, but also on computer access at school. For this reason, complaints have been raised regarding the poor extent of PC provision in schools in some European states. In Norway and Denmark, one PC is available for every three school students. In Germany, 15 school students have to share one PC. Several European states will have to provide schools with much better equipment in order to ensure that both girls and boys have access to PCs and the Internet appropriate for their age.

Health and physical experience

Throughout the EU, girls rate their state of health as poorer than boys do. Girls are affected by psychosomatic symptoms more frequently than boys. The conditions include diseases such as depression, dejectedness, eating disturbances, anorexia, etc. Depression occurs twice as frequently among girls as among boys. In 2002, on average 40% of 15-year-old girls in European countries felt dejected. Girls regard themselves and their own bodies in a more critical way. 23% of girls ages 11–15 eat an inadequate diet. Girls frequently (about 40%) feel that they are too fat, despite having a normal weight or being underweight.

Cigarette and alcohol consumption among girls has increased in recent years throughout Europe. The proportion of girls who smoke daily is now higher than that for boys in many countries. Alcohol and drugs – such as cannabis, for example – are consumed by boys more frequently than by girls, but there are large country-specific differences. In Switzerland and the United Kingdom, 40% of girls have already had contact with cannabis, compared with only 15% in the Ukraine, Croatia, and Portugal. Supporting girls in developing a feeling of well-being and helping them develop health-conscious behaviour are still urgent tasks for schools and youth institutions in Europe.

Violence against girls

There are currently no reliable figures for violence against girls that are comparable throughout Europe. The Coordinated Action on Human Rights Violations (CAHRV) network is making efforts to improve the data situation. Crime statistics only capture a fraction of the problem. In addition, the concept of violence is interpreted in widely varying ways. Studies in Germany indicate that boys are affected by violence more frequently than girls. This is true to a great extent in relation to violence in schools, violence from same-age children, and to a lesser extent for forms of corporal punishment by parents. In Germany, girls are affected by severe forms of violence and by sexual violence slightly more frequently than boys. 16% of girls report having had such experiences before the age of 16. The results of an international study on violence against children are expected in October 2006. As violence against children is often associated with other stress factors as well and has very serious consequences for children, methods of preventing violence need to be further developed.

Teenage pregnancy

A study conducted in 28 OECD states in 1998 showed that in many states, women are subject to substantial disadvantages as a result of early maternity. In 13 European states, the poverty risk is twice as high for teenage mothers as in other members of their age group.

In 19 of the 28 countries studied, the number of teenage mothers has halved in the last 30 years. This development is reducing the poverty risk for young women, as well as reducing the extent to which poverty is passed on from one generation to the next. As the teenage pregnancy rates differ widely among European countries, it can be assumed that there is a continuing need for prevention, at least in countries with higher birth rates among women under 18. In 1998, the United Kingdom had the highest rate of teenage pregnancies in Europe, with 31 pregnancies per 1000 girls under 18. Slovakia and Hungary followed in second and third place. Sex education and easy access to contraceptives ought to be ensured in every country. In addition, improved vocational and professional prospects for girls could play an important role.

Girls with multiple discrimination

The child poverty rate has been increasing in recent years in several European countries. In several EU states, it is above the poverty rate for the corresponding population as a whole. Poverty and social exclusion for their parents affects children's cognitive development and education. Poverty is also a threat to the psychosocial well-being of girls and boys. Europe will therefore have to continue to fight child poverty.

Throughout Europe, poverty and low educational status on the part of parents and girls are associated with poor health-promoting behaviour on the part of the girls and with an unfavourable assessment of their own health.

Girls and young women who do not have a school-leaving qualification by the age of 17–19 and who are not taking part in any educational or training schemes deserve particular attention. Eurostat estimated the proportion as 16% (21% for boys) in the Eurozone in 2003. If they do not receive appropriate assistance, their chances in the job market are likely to be very poor.

Women with handicaps are often underestimated in the statistics. As European countries define handicap in very different ways, comparable figures are not available. It is certain, however, that boys are affected by handicap more frequently than girls. In Germany, boys are also overrepresented in special schools. Overall, both handicapped girls and handicapped boys have good school-leaving qualifications more rarely than the non-handicapped. It is difficult for them to find a place in the working world. According to U.N. data, girls and women with handicaps are affected by sexual violence twice as often. Measures are needed that will allow handicapped children to take part in normal lessons and leisure activities. They also need high-quality services and financial grants to allow them to receive education and training appropriate to their strengths and abilities.

In several European states, foreign girls probably receive a poorer school education than local girls. This is true in Germany, for example. Since foreign status is defined

differently in different countries, comparable figures are not available. In Germany, girls with an immigrant background are found more often in fields of vocational training without any prospects. Many young foreign women in Germany withdraw from the job market very early. With regard to their health, both foreign girls and German ones report physical symptoms more frequently than boys.

Overall, there are insufficient data on the life situation and lifestyle patterns of girls who are subject to multiple discrimination. For example, immigrants are not taken into account at all in many surveys, and surveys often lack any differentiation with regard to sex or country of origin. To make it possible to develop targeted supportive measures, it is urgently necessary to obtain better data on the life situation, lifestyle, and life planning of girls who are subject to multiple discrimination. It would also be helpful for the European states to compare their national programmes of support for girls with multiple discrimination and to examine which measures are capable of being transferred from one country to another.