

**Opening Remarks by Carolyn Hannan  
Director, Division for the Advancement of Women**

**At the viewing and discussion of the film “Heroic Girlz”  
Organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women  
in collaboration with UNICEF and the Working Group on Girls of the UNICEF NGO Committee.  
6 March 2009**

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the screening of two films on the empowerment of girls, organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women in collaboration with UNICEF and the Working Group on Girls of the NGO Committee on UNICEF. This screening is part of an effort to keep a strong focus on the girl child in the context of the Commission on the Status of Women, following the adoption of the agreed conclusions on the girl child in 2007. These agreed conclusions are available in the six official UN languages and we hope that they will be used effectively at national level.

The purpose of this event is to share an example from the United States of the use of creative arts to empower young girls and strengthen their voice. It is hoped that the discussion around the approach used in this project will provide inspiration and guidance on how similar approaches could be used in other contexts. In the discussion following the viewing, participants will share examples of innovative approaches in empowering girls from other parts of the world.

Before we view the films, I would like to give a brief background. The two films come out of a school project in upstate New York in 2005 where four 11 year-old girls were encouraged to identify a woman from history (a heroic woman) and to investigate how her life must have been as a pre-teen or as a “Heroic Girl”. In this manner, they were encouraged to think about their own potential and future development as young women.

The girls researched and wrote about four women as their personal historical heroes. They choose Elizabeth Cady Stanton – a suffragette and one of the authors of a path-breaking convention on women’s rights in 1848; Amelia Bloomer – another suffragette who was also the first woman to own and publish a newspaper: *The Lilly*; Louisa May Alcott – the famous author of the novel *Little Women*; and Amelia Earhart – one of the first and most famous of all women pilots.

A play was developed on the basis of the girls’ writing and the play was later turned into an award-winning film. The play and film tells the story of how these four women met in the afterlife and recalled an important event from their lives at age 11. Stanton’s father asks, “Why couldn’t you have been born a boy?” Alcott beats the boys at footraces and writes in her garret. Earhart plummets down a homemade rollercoaster. And Bloomer witnesses the deadly consequences of heavy skirts.

I am happy to introduce you to the four girls who took part in this project - Devon Yurko, Elon Michaud, Thea Ezinga and Emma Parrish Post – as well as Cindy Parish, the writer and Meg Agnew, the director. Let me also introduce SuEllen Hamkins, a psychiatrist, who was involved in the project.

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The positive impact that the project had on the four young girls – now 15 years old – and the recognition that the approach of encouraging girls to “become” their women heroes could be used effectively in other settings, led to a second film – a 19-minute documentary entitled *Making History: The How and Why of Heroic Girlz* which we will now screen. The film describes the project’s use of writing, visual arts and theater arts to empower girls and help strengthen their voices. Meg Agnew and Cindy Parrish have also written a teacher’s guide that describes the activities in detail so that others could make their own *Heroic Girlz*.

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[Now that we have seen this inspiring process from the US, I would now like to ask Ravi Karkara from UNICEF to share some examples of ways in which UNICEF has used creative arts to empower girls.

I now give the floor to Mary-Kay Louchart from the Working Group on Girls to provide some information on projects that use the arts to empower girls.

I now ask Cindy Parrish, Meg Agnew and SuEllen Hamkins to share information on ways in which they think the approach in Heroic Girls could be used in other contexts.]

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Heroic Girlz provides a good practice example of how theatre and film can be used for girls’ empowerment. Girls in any part of the world could be encouraged to choose women heroes from their own cultures and examine their lives and backgrounds as part of the process of self-empowerment. Girls could write, produce and perform short plays on these “heroic girlz” and use other creative art forms as part of the empowerment process. This can be done even on a very low budget. In addition to the benefits of introducing girls to women heroes from within their own countries and cultures, a further positive aspect of the Heroic Girlz approach is that it introduces girls in a very natural way to the issue of gender equality and the struggles and gains from the past.

We know that theatre is a powerful medium in poor communities and an effective tool for social change. We have heard other good examples of what is being done in different parts of the world from UNICEF, the Working Group on Girls and other participants. I hope that we have sown some seeds here today to inspire further work through the arts to empower girls and strengthen their voice.

Let me now give the girls who started the Heroic Girlz project the last word. We have seen you on the film, enjoyed the stories about your personal heroes, and admired your talents as actors. You have had a chance to listen to the discussion on the importance of the arts for empowering girls. We look forward to hearing from you directly on what involvement in this project meant to you and any messages you want us to take with us from this event.

Thank you.