

21-22 May 2001

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
at a seminar on "Girls' Education: from Rhetoric to Action"**

I wish to welcome you all to this seminar on "Girls' Education, from Rhetoric to Action". I am making the following remarks in my capacity as the President of the 55th General Assembly of the United Nations, which is also known as the Millennium Assembly.

As many of you know, last September an unprecedented number of Heads of State and Government attended the Millennium Summit and committed themselves and their Governments to the implementation of the Millennium Declaration, in which the welfare of children is a central element. The Heads of State and Government resolved to ensure that by 2015, not only would the proportion of people living in poverty be halved, but also children everywhere, boys and girls alike, would be able to complete a full course of primary schooling, and girls and boys would have equal access to all levels of education. This commitment reconfirms the Dakar Framework of Action, Education for All, of April 2000, which by the same time-frame seeks to ensure that in particular girls, children living in difficult circumstances, and those belonging to ethnic minorities, would have access to completely free and compulsory primary education of good quality.

The United Nations provides a framework for many international instruments and legislation, which confirm the right of children to education. This right has been repeatedly affirmed for example in 1948 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in 1989 in the Convention of the Rights of the Child, and in the 1990 by the World Summit for Children, as well as by a number of United Nations Global Conferences of the 1990s. Many of these international instruments have specific reference to the girl child, and the particular need to protect the rights of the girl child.

International instruments exist - what is lacking is their full implementation. I am saddened to say that in spite of all these international agreements, commitments and conferences to promote universal education for all, the truth is that more than 110 million children, most of them in the developing world, are denied their basic right - the right to education - and that two thirds of these 110 million children are girls.

We are still far from equal treatment of children all over the world. In the industrialized countries, the primary school enrolment rate in 1999 was 98%, as compared with 57% in sub-Saharan Africa and 68% in the South Asia. Nevertheless, I want to be optimistic - development has taken place and since the 1960s the school enrolment and literary rate of girls and women has improved in many parts of the world. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, the primary school enrolment rate climbed from about 25% in 1960 to nearly 60% in 1980. After declining in the 1980s, school

enrolment in this region has again reached the level of about 60%. In 1960 the number of boys attending school was nearly twice that of girls. However, this gender gap is gradually narrowing, so that the primary school attendance rate of girls is currently about 57% as compared with about 61% of boys. At the same time about 50% of women in this region are literate. - These simple figures demonstrate that progress is there, yet much still needs to be done to make universal education a reality, not only a dream.

When the right to education becomes the norm the whole world gains. When women and girls, future mothers, are educated, the whole nation is educated. This has undisputedly been proven true by science and statistics.

Schools shape the future of our children. Not only are they sites of learning, but also sites for promoting values such as the principles of democracy and respect for each other. Governments bear a major responsibility to design school curricula so that they support the development of children to respect the integrity of others. The fundamental values of the Millennium Declaration may give guidance also here: the principles of freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility contained in the Declaration should constitute the basic value framework in education.

The Special Session of the General Assembly on the 10-year review of the World Summit for Children is currently being prepared. I had the privilege of serving as the Head of the Finnish delegation to the World Summit for Children in September 1990. Now, I have the honor of serving as the President of the General Assembly of the United Nations at the time of preparing for the 10-year review.

Ten years ago, the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children resolved that one of the major tasks was to ensure that girls are given equal treatment and opportunity from the very beginning. Provision of basic education and literacy for all are among the most important contributions that can be made to the development of girls and children in general.

The Special Session of the General Assembly on the 10-year review of the World Summit for Children will be held from 19 to 21 September 2001. The review is based on national, regional and global reports, assessing the achievements of the last decade. Naturally, the review will serve as a template for planning for future actions. The expected outcomes of the special session include a global agenda with a set of goals and a plan of action devoted to ensuring three essential outcomes:

- The best possible start in life for all children;
- Good-quality basic education for all children; and
- The opportunity for all children, especially adolescents, to have meaningful participation in their communities.

The final preparatory committee meeting of this Special Session of the General Assembly will be held in mid-June to complete the outcome document. I may note here that education will be a strong crosscutting issue in this document, as indicated in the available drafts. It is also recognized that one of the basic requirements in creating a child-friendly world is to give every child the opportunity to complete basic education. Massive investment in education and training is needed. Schools can be used as conduits of information on primary health care and nutrition. I believe that modern information and communication technologies, when linked with older technologies, may be of service in these efforts.

We all know that girls and boys are not equally treated everywhere. The 10-year review will put specific emphasis on efforts to eliminate all forms of discrimination against the girl child, while at the same time promoting gender equality and equal access to services, including basic education.

It is not only the availability of education that matters - we need to ensure the quality of education as well. Too often underpaid, untrained and overworked teachers have to manage with overcrowded, unhealthy and poorly equipped classrooms. Yet, I believe that we should not look only at the infrastructure and at the need to construct more schools: literacy classes may be conducted successfully under a tree, if little else is available than a strong will to learn. Likewise, teacher training needs strong emphasis.

Speaking of education, we need to look at a whole range of institutions, which are linked to teaching and learning. Governments need to ensure that responsive, participatory and accountable systems of education and management of schools, at community and national levels are in place. Governments themselves need to invest more in education - and we, as the international community, need to support their efforts.

Let me add here a specific reference to the commitment of African governments. I am currently chairing an open-ended working group of the General Assembly on Africa, and I am happy to say that one of the two themes that this working group chose to focus its discussion on is education.

I could go on speaking on this topic, which is very close to my heart. However, my intervention was meant only to give you an overview of the issues and the work being done at the United Nations, in particular in the General Assembly. The education of girls is not a single vertical issue; it needs to be looked at in a horizontally coherent manner, as an essential part of our overall efforts to eliminate discrimination from this world, and in our target to improve the start of life for the future of mankind - our children.