



# **Commission on the Status of Women**

**Statement of Thoraya Ahmed Obaid**

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Madam Chairperson,  
Mr. President of ECOSOC,  
Madam Deputy-Secretary-General,  
Madam Chair of the CEDAW Committee,  
NGOs Representatives,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to address the opening of this fifty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women, especially in the presence of our Deputy-Secretary-General, Asha-Rose Migiro, with whom we, senior staff of the United Nations, commit ourselves to work to ensure that all of us are held accountable for our gender goals.

I would first like to congratulate my colleagues in UNICEF, led by Ann Veneman, for The State of the World's Children 2007 report: Women and Children - The double dividend of gender equality. The title says it all: if we invest in women, we are also investing in children, especially the girl child. And if we invest in the girl child, we are investing in the mother and citizen of tomorrow. Investing in women and girls is one of the best investments a government can make.

As I speak, a woman in a developing country is about to give birth. If she and her newborn survive, the family and the community will display pride to count one additional member. Yet, if that member is a baby girl, the course of her life might differ drastically from that of a baby boy.

We at UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, welcome the priority theme of this year's session: "The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child".

No matter where a girl is born, she should be able to live free of discrimination and violence. She should be able to enjoy respect of her human rights and fundamental freedoms. When they created the United Nations more than 60 years ago, the founders proclaimed their faith in human rights, in the inherent dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women.

Over the years, these rights have been elaborated in declarations, plans of action, and Conventions, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and they have been articulated in national constitutions and laws.

And yet we are gathered here today because the ideal of every girl living in dignity, in freedom from fear and want, with equal opportunities and equal rights remains out of reach for millions of girls around the world.

Today far too many girls are denied an education. They are married as child brides, their dreams stolen from them before their very eyes.

Too many girls give birth before they are ready, putting their lives and the lives of their babies at risk. Far too many girls suffer from gender-based violence. And far too many are infected with HIV.

We are gathered here as representatives of the UN system, as representatives of government, of civil society and the private sector because we know the realities and want to see greater progress. Discrimination against the girl child is a serious human rights violation that harms all of us, beginning with the girl child herself.

Empowering girls through education is a priority. It helps girls build their self-esteem and self-confidence. It builds their capacities to know and fight for their rights. And it gives them lifetime tools to fulfill their aspirations and dreams and become driving forces for development and the real agents of change that our world needs.

Yet, today, as many as 55 million girls continue to be left out of formal schooling. Together we must do more to ensure universal access to primary education and close gender gaps in secondary education. By doing so, we will reduce poverty and promote gender equality.

While the global campaign led by UNESCO for Education for All is making progress, we must work together to increase its momentum. Countries leading the way forward are instituting free secondary education, subsidies for girls and incentives for households. UNFPA is committed to promoting universal education and we are committed to education that promotes life skills, equality and human rights, including the right to sexual and reproductive health. Studies show that young people who receive factual and comprehensive information are more likely to engage in healthy and responsible behaviour.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is unacceptable that girls in some societies continue to be marginalized and viewed as inferior and less valuable than boys. Girls are often assigned harsh duties without relief.

Yet at the same time all over the world, girls are being exposed to new ideas and experiences and many are caught between tradition and change.

In response, we must work with girls themselves and with parents and leaders in their communities to provide supportive guidance and foster inter-generational understanding as girls navigate the new challenges in their lives. We must encourage communities to raise girls and boys to respect each other, to aspire equally to educational and work opportunities and to expect fair and mutually respectful relationships.

And we must continue to work with women's and youth groups and civil society, and do more to reach out to boys and men. The values of equal worth, mutual respect, and shared rights and responsibilities must be taught from an early age.

Whether it is domestic violence, incest, rape, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, child prostitution and child pornography, trafficking, forced labour, or harmful traditional practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation, the result is the same: a girl is prevented from exercising her human rights, her dignity is violated and her health and well-being as well as her future are placed in jeopardy.

Today an estimated 82 million girls in developing countries who are now between the ages of 10 and 17 will be married before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Child marriage puts the health of young girls in danger. In most cases, child marriage results in teenage pregnancy and early childbearing, which in turn puts the young girl at higher risks of maternal mortality, injury and disability. One of the most severe consequences of early childbearing is obstetric fistula.

Today, at least two million young women and girls in developing countries are affected by obstetric fistula, especially among the most impoverished rural girls who have been forced to drop out school, if they ever had such an opportunity, coerced into early marriage, and lack access to health information and services, especially reproductive health information and services, including family planning.

If these girls and women had access to reproductive health services including emergency obstetric care, they would never suffer the devastating condition of fistula—a condition that was eliminated in wealthy nations over a century ago.

UNFPA is proud of its Global Campaign to End Fistula and the vital support we are receiving from partner countries. I am pleased to inform you that the Campaign has grown from 12 countries in 2003 to 40 countries today. With many partners in these countries, we are making progress and we are committed to making even more.

Together with partners, we are also working to end female genital mutilation or cutting. Worldwide, an estimated 100 to 140 million girls and women have undergone the practice and 3 million girls continue to be at risk each year.

We are encouraged by the progress that is underway in more than a dozen countries that have passed laws to make this harmful traditional practice illegal. Thanks to rising awareness, and community leadership and dialogue, increasing numbers of women, men and young people now disapprove the practice.

Awareness is also increasing about prenatal sex selection and female infanticide. In some places, a strong preference for sons has led to the elimination of millions of girls, resulting in serious demographic imbalances that have long term negative social and economic impacts.

As a matter of urgency, where this is happening, countries must enact and enforce laws banning sex selection, create community-based networks to advocate against the practice, sensitize health providers and integrate national development strategies, comprehensive measures and incentives that promote the equal value and equal opportunities for girls.

We at UNFPA work closely with such countries to ensure that girls are valued and that the practice is banned.

Ladies and gentlemen,

All over the world, we see examples of how family, community and educational institutions -all charged with a protective mission- often jeopardize the safety of girls.

This is one of the many negative manifestations of gender discrimination and violence, not the least of which is a crushing of the human spirit. Another negative outcome is the spread of HIV and AIDS.

The role of gender based violence in increasing the vulnerability of girls and young women to HIV/AIDS must be urgently addressed. Without dedicated efforts, marginalized and disadvantaged girls will continue to bear a rising and disproportionate share of HIV infections. Promoting and protecting the rights of girls also protects them from HIV infection.

As we meet today, violence against women and girls, including rape as a weapon of war, is occurring on a massive and devastating scale in conflict and post-conflict situations around the world. Our response has to be commensurate to the problem. This is urgent given the fact that an estimated 40 per cent of child soldiers are girls who were forcibly recruited.

UNFPA appeals to countries to vigorously enact and enforce laws and regulations that address discrimination and violence against women and girls, and to advance gender equality and human rights, including the right to sexual and reproductive health. The way forward is laid out in internationally agreed instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the ICPD Programme of Action and the Beijing Platform for Action.

As we work together to deliver as One UN in support of national development, we must make human rights a priority. I am encouraged by the progress being made to mainstream a human rights-based approach in our work as a United Nations system. UNFPA will continue to champion UN reform that puts human rights, including the rights of the girl child, at the center of the equation and we will work with UNICEF, UNIFEM and other sister agencies to support national efforts to end discrimination and violence against women and girls.

Today, 89 governments have some legislative provisions that specifically address domestic violence; marital rape may be prosecuted in at least 104 countries; 90 governments have some form of legislative provision against sexual harassment; and 93 nations have legal provisions against human trafficking.

While we express appreciation to those countries that have put in place programmes for women and girls affected by violence, we also urge the governments and parliaments that have adopted laws to ensure their implementation.

And we invite all stakeholders to strengthen their efforts in providing evidence-based information on gender-based violence, and preventing and addressing violence against girls and young women.

Madam Chair,

To conclude, I would like to stress that the world will not reduce poverty and advance human development, as expressed in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGS) and other internationally adopted goals, unless we make the protection and promotion of human rights, including for women and girls, a priority. This priority must be reflected in national development plans, poverty reduction strategies, sector wide reforms and budgets.

We call upon all Governments to take all necessary measures and to institute and implement legal reforms to ensure the full and equal enjoyment by the girl child of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and to take effective action against violations of those rights and freedoms. As the great leader, Nelson Mandela, said: “To deny any person their human rights is to challenge their very humanity.”

Thank you.