



## **A parliamentary perspective on discrimination and violence against the girl child**

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A parliamentary event organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women on the occasion of the 51st Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

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### **Key note address**

## **Violence and discrimination against the girl child: General introduction**

**Dr. Rima Salah, Deputy Executive Director, UNICEF**

Distinguished Delegates, Parliamentarians, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be here with you today. I think it is fair to say that over recent years, and particularly since our collaboration at the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children in 2002, the relationship between UNICEF and the IPU really has gone from strength to strength. We have produced publications together – such as the Handbook for parliamentarians on child protection and now we are working on the handbook on violence against children, held meetings together, and more generally, we have got to know each other better and started to develop a partnership that truly realizes the compatibility of our two organisations and the complementarity of our work. So I join you here today as partner, colleague and friend.

Let me start by reaffirming the fundamental principles that underlie this meeting, the Commission on the Status of Women and our work together on gender, women and girls overall. We are here because we recognize that our commitment to human rights is meaningless if it is not a commitment to equality for women and girls. We are here because our experience has taught us that our commitment to children has little value if it is not a commitment to health, education and protection for all children, both boys and girls equally. We are here because we acknowledge that our commitment to the Millennium Development Goals is empty if we do not pursue them all with the determination to ensure that the progress they represent is not only enjoyed equally by girls and boys but that it actually contributes to narrowing the gap between them.

It has been said that the best gauge of a society's moral and ethical standing is the way it treats its children. I believe we can go further, recognizing that there is no better test of our commitment to justice, no better measure of our stated belief in non-discrimination and the equal rights of all, than the way the world treats its girls and its women. By both measures, while we are moving in the right direction, we are doing so far too slowly. And it is the world's girls that we continue to fail on both counts. Too many girls are out of school and engaged in exploitative labor; girls are still hugely more vulnerable to HIV infection; girls health and nutrition status remains significantly below that of boys; rape and sexual violence remain commonplace in conflicts; girls continue to be trafficked; female genital mutilation persists. Whatever progress we have seen is hard to celebrate in the context of the reality of the lives that many girls lead.

When I say we are failing, I do so because I also recognize that we in UNICEF should be doing more. Our performance on gender mainstreaming and in ensuring that all our programs take every opportunity to improve the situation of girls and end the inequalities that threaten the achievement of the MDGs is simply not good enough. That is why we are undertaking an independent institutional evaluation of all our programs which will provide the basis for a plan of action for institutional change that we hope will improve the results we deliver together with our partners.

So it is in this spirit of self-reflection that I would like to propose four questions for your consideration. I hope these will help frame some of the discussions of our meeting, and more generally remind us of some of the specifics we are dealing with. These questions are not new, but they are as relevant today as they have ever been. And they are not radical, because there is nothing radical in rejecting the view that half the world's population is born into second-class status. But they do reflect what, from UNICEF's perspective and based on our experience around the world, we believe to be the issues at the heart of addressing discrimination and violence against girls.

My first question is: 'What more can we do to ensure that all girls go to schools that offer them a proper education in an environment that meets their needs as girls and allows them to learn and study in safety?' We are all aware of the efforts that have been made to get girls into school, but I think we also all agree that we can do better. We need to abolish school fees; support community-based early childhood development programs that help parents, not just mothers but fathers too, to provide appropriate care for girls; make sure girls who aren't in school are offered opportunities for an education, whether formal or informal; and to invest in programs, both in and outside of schools, that build girls life-skills so that they can grow into leaders in their communities, in their countries' economies and for their nations, as well as learn how better to protect themselves from exploitation and violence. We know education works. We know that, while it is no 'cure-all', it remains one of the most cost-effective ways of promoting girls' empowerment, development and self-reliance. So maybe we can take this opportunity to ask ourselves how we are really doing on this front.

My second question is: 'What more must we be doing to provide girls with an opportunity to have their voices heard?' We all know that Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child affords all children, girls and boys alike, the right to a say in decisions affecting them. But we are also aware that this presents a special challenge for girls. We need to create spaces for girls to have their say, just as the Bureau and Secretariat have done at this CSW. This is not rhetoric. It is an active decision that should also be seen as a model for the processes whereby national and sub-national programs, budget allocations and policies are determined. I want to return to this point later on. Let us share our experiences of what has worked and commit ourselves to try out new avenues and approaches that will end the silence and allow girls to become their own best advocates.

My third question is: 'How effectively are we encouraging and supporting men and boys to become part of the solution?' Challenging gender discrimination is not a job for women and girls only or even primarily. Many of the problems girls face arise from the actions or inaction of men and boys. So we cannot conceive of a solution to these problems within which men and boys are not active participants.. And I think here particularly of the role that fathers can play in supporting their girls to develop to their fullest potential, to grow up valued equally and to know that and carry that with them into their adult lives. Again, let us share our experience, identify best practices and build upon what works.

My fourth and final question is: 'Are we trying hard enough to have an accurate reflection and picture of the real situation of the world's girls?' It is a simple fact that our data on the situation of girls and women is inadequate. Data that we need to properly understand the nature of the challenge we face and to respond to it is too often unavailable. Sometimes unavailability reflects inherent difficulties in gathering data, although this does not mean that we could not do more to

find ways around these difficulties. But sometimes it reflects a failure to look. And we must surely ask ourselves whether a failure to look reflects a failure to care. So let us make a commitment to revitalize our efforts to get the data foundation in place as a prerequisite for all our future work.

And for all these questions we need to recognize that when we talk of girls we are not talking about a homogenous group. We need to recognize that some girls may need special attention, special support, special efforts on our part. For example, we may need to target girls living in households below the poverty line, belonging to disadvantaged groups or who have been the victims of violence or exploitation. That all girls have the same rights does not mean that one-size-fits-all policy responses will do the job.

I believe these are questions for us all. For UNICEF's part we need to be clear how we contribute to solutions and results, within the framework of the Millennium Declaration and its Goals.

Madam Chair,

I would like to turn now to the specific question of what this means for parliamentarians. I will refer specifically to your role with regard to legislation, oversight, budgets, as advocates and as partners. So let me begin with legislation.

It has been said that legislation and the law are too important to leave to lawyers. I think that is an important observation. You are all involved in the development of legislation in your countries and I think there are important ways in which you can help to make them work better for women and girls. Before considering content, I think it is appropriate for parliamentarians to consider the processes by which legislation is developed. Are they participatory? Do they provide opportunities for women and girls to give their views, perspectives and inputs, to take some sort of ownership of these rules and regulations that shape their lives? If not, what can you do, to insist that these processes change, to make yourselves available to women and girls to listen, hear what they say, and to take those messages into the legislative process?

Second, of course, content is important. A thorough appreciation of the extent to which laws as a whole properly guarantee and deliver on the rights of women and girls is essential if the legal system and body of law is to do justice to the issues we are all concerned with. Parliamentarians have many opportunities to review legislation, to consider in-depth the extent to which it truly delivers the protection for women and girls that it should. You also have the opportunity to review new laws through that lens.

Another capacity you have is to make sure that legislation proposed is good not only on paper but also in practice, by insisting that legislation is linked to adequate budget provision to ensure its enforcement and that it is accompanied by adequate and appropriate enabling legislation. You know that is essential to match resources to good intentions. UNICEF knows through long experience that laws mean little without proper resources. Yet in a competitive resource environment women and girls often come at the bottom of the list. Parliamentarians are one of the only mandated groups who can raise this issue.

In working with legislation, parliamentarians can make reference to international experience and knowledge, some perhaps collated by UNICEF, as well as using international instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child or the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women as a basis for your consideration.

I would like to stress that legislation that affects the lives of women and girls is not necessarily the same as legislation that explicitly refers to or targets women and girls. Many if not all areas of legislation are relevant to women and girls' lives, and need to be developed, reviewed and discussed with a gender perspective. Areas of connected legislation include economic and development policies, security measures, education policies, health policies, criminal law, trade provisions, labour legislation, media regulation, emergency legislation (for example, in conflict

situations), social welfare policies, child-care policies, immigration and taxation. Legislation in such areas regularly omits consideration of gender: it is parliamentarians who can highlight it during parliamentary consideration.

To turn to oversight, parliamentarians' role as the watchdog over the executive is perhaps somewhat simpler. It includes making sure that the rights of women and girls are not forgotten in all aspects of the work of the executive branch. One important tool in many systems is the use of parliamentary questions. This can have an effect in different ways, but experience has shown us that one impact is to force government to look more closely at issues they may have been neglecting. For example, a question asking for sex-disaggregated data on a particular development issue may push a ministry to consider an issue from a gender perspective that it had not considered in that way before. For example, we know the huge contribution that has been made with regard to girls' education through the routine requirement that enrolment, attendance and attainment data be broken down between girls and boys, a requirement that arose from people asking a question. And we know that parliamentarians are very well placed to ask exactly those sorts of difficult but vital questions.

So I think there are many questions that you can ask, many characteristics of the work of the executive that you can critique, if you will. You can call for programmes to be time-bound and give precise target dates for the attainment of specific results. You can insist that national budgetary processes allocate adequate funding for the activities planned. You can seek to ensure that citizens are widely informed of these activities. You can call for public hearings to examine certain situations and take stock of developments. I am sure you all have much experience to share on ways in which you have achieved results through these sorts of activities.

I want to turn now to what is perhaps the less technical, but no less important role of parliamentarians. Although you come from diverse and varied political systems where the role and nature of parliaments can differ markedly, you all share one key characteristic; that is that you are in some way leaders within your countries, societies, constituencies and communities. It is precisely this leadership which affords you the authority to be such effective champions for women and girls. Advocacy is often considered one of the softer elements of what we do, but I think we really cannot overemphasise its importance. Because it is very much through advocacy that we change attitudes; that we provide the moral support and encouragement for the efforts of others; that we challenge the stereotypes and prejudices that have such pervasive and devastating consequences; and that we break the silence around many of the abuses of rights of women and girls that continue to prevail.

But what exactly does advocacy entail for a parliamentarian? Again, many if not all of you will know better than I the ways in which you use your position and influence to bring about change, and I encourage you to share such experience throughout this meeting. I would just like to share some of UNICEF's experience in a similar vein. Because we have seen parliamentarians drive change through visiting services or projects that promote the rights of women and girls. We have applauded the speeches and read with pleasure the articles of parliamentarians in support of the rights of women and girls. We have supported and taken part in events organized or sponsored by parliamentarians to consider and promote the promotion of rights of women and girls. And we have stood alongside parliamentarians in encouraging the work of national and international NGOs and other civil society organisations in their contribution to the realization of the rights of women and girls. The reality is that parliamentarians are respected members of communities who get listened to. You have a voice and a responsibility to use it that you should not and indeed do not shy away from.

Finally, a brief word on partnership. We often talk partnership, because we recognize, rightly, that our ambitions exceed the capacity of any one of us alone and because we recognize that we share common responsibilities. But we can always broaden, deepen and strengthen partnerships, as UNICEF and IPU have discovered these past few years. Partnership is about complementary efforts and mutual solidarity. It is about bringing in technical skills, political

weight, new ideas, new perspectives and knowledge about the situation on the ground, or additional resources whether human or financial, so that together we can deliver on our shared objectives. What is not always obvious is where these partnerships may lie. I am sure you already enjoy partnerships with other parliamentarians in your country and – since you are here - quite possibly with other parliamentarians in other countries. Some of you may work with international organisations like UNICEF or NGOs like Save the Children or domestic civil society groups. Some of you may even work with youth groups, or even reach out to communities where women and girls live. Some may have established partnerships with the private sector, others with faith-based organisations. Again, I encourage you to share your experiences with colleagues, because the realization of the rights of women and girls is an undertaking where all support is not just welcome but in a very practical sense imperative.

Dear colleagues,

My hope is that this meeting and meetings like it draw us ever closer to the clear recognition that while our need to do better is collective, our responsibilities and accountabilities are individual. I believe it is the recognition of those responsibilities and the determination to act upon them that is the essential foundation for change. I have tried to lay out some of the ways that parliamentarians in particular can live up to that responsibility. Because when we step into a position of greater authority we necessarily assume greater responsibility.

To every girl that is excluded from school, or who struggles to learn in an environment where she fears violence or sexual abuse; to every girl whose voice has been silenced, whose opinions and views have been ignored and who has learned that she lives in a world that simply doesn't care what she thinks; to every girl who has been exploited for her labour or her body; all of us here have an urgent responsibility. I ask all of us to live up to that responsibility and assure you of the commitment of UNICEF to work with you to contribute all it can in support of your efforts.

Thank you for your attention and I wish this meeting the utmost success.