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Forum on Girls' Education

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Statement by Carol Bellamy Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund to the Millennium Assembly Forum on Girls' Education

New York, 7 September 2000

Mrs. Annan, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I want to join in welcoming all of you to this Millennium Assembly Forum on Girls' Education -- and I want to thank our Honorary Chair, Mrs. Annan, for her initiative in bringing us together today -- an initiative that grows out of her strong personal commitment to the issue of girls' education.

I also thank her for her moving and insightful remarks, which have set a tone of personal involvement and commitment that I hope will be reflected throughout this meeting.

Even after a decade of international conferences -- and with all due respect to the meetings under way next door -- this gathering here today is truly historic in scale. Rarely have so many first ~~spouses~~ ^{Ladies} gathered to discuss a single global issue.

That the subject before us is girls' education is enormously gratifying -- for I am convinced that educating the girls of the world is the single most challenging issue facing us in development today.

Because of the sheer diversity of participants here today, we have an unusual opportunity to share and to learn from each other -- and I know that by the time we are done, we will all have gained a better understanding of the demands, rewards and challenges of girls' education on a global scale.

In this connection, we owe a great debt of gratitude to the Secretary-General, who not only announced the UN Girls' Education Initiative at the World Education Forum at Dakar in April -- but made girls' education a priority in his remarkable Report to the Millennium Assembly, titled We the Peoples.

~~In so doing,~~ The Secretary-General has reminded us of an important truth: that there can be no significant or sustainable transformation in societies -- and no significant and lasting reduction in global poverty -- until girls receive the quality basic education they deserve and take their rightful place as equal partners in development.

In study after study -- by the UN, by the World Bank, by academics the world over -- girls' education emerges as the single best investment that any society can make.

It provides enormous economic benefits for the country; decreases social burdens on governments; and makes it possible to create larger, better prepared work forces.

Indeed, a quality basic education for girls is the essential prerequisite for the ~~conquest~~ ^{defeat} of poverty -- which has become the over-arching goal of the United Nations and the international community in this new century.

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Educated girls grow into educated women -- women who are more likely to participate in making decisions that affect their lives and the lives of those they love. They will understand more fully the dangers of the scourge of HIV/AIDS. And they are more likely to be healthy, to have smaller families, and to have healthier and better-educated children.

Only education can equip girls with the confidence to make the most of their abilities; that can provide a means for changing attitudes about violence while promoting equality; and that can put young women on a path to economic and social empowerment.

Quality education and basic literacy will open the doors to information technology and the "new economy", and prevent the "digital divide" from becoming a new gender divide.

But girls' education is more than a cost-effective investment; more than an economic issue; more than a desirable aspiration that societies should try to provide. Education, particularly girls' education, is an inalienable human right, guaranteed under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been signed and ratified by every country in the world today save two.

Any one of these reasons is itself a powerful argument for girls' education. Yet we continue to face a situation in which girls remain at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to obtaining their right to a quality basic education. Consider these facts:

There are some 700 million children between 6 and 11 years old. More than 110 million of them are not in school -- and some two-thirds of those children are girls.

While we can spot persistent and obvious gender gaps in Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East -- national level data hide disparities in all countries in all regions, in developing countries and industrialized countries alike.

Why should this be so? Quite frankly, in many parts of the world there are deep-rooted obstacles to educating girls. Cultural traditions and practices sometimes forbid it. Competing claims from families and communities sometimes mean that a girl is sent to work when she should be sent to school. And politics sometimes forces communities to think they must choose between educating boys and educating girls, and the choice is often made to educate boys -- when the right answer is to educate both.

Moreover, the enervating and degrading effects of poverty often mean that educating the girls in the family is not even contemplated. Generally, when girls do not attend school it is not because their parents do not love or cherish them, but because families living in abject poverty need every available source of income. And it is who girls must look after their younger siblings while mothers earn family income.