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**The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of
Discrimination against Women**

Girls' and Women's Right to Education:

Half-day general discussion



Opening remarks

**Navi Pillay
High Commissioner for Human Rights**

**Geneva, 7 July 2014
Palais des Nations, Room XVI**

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am glad to welcome you to this important half-day general discussion on girls' and women's right to education, organized in partnership with our colleagues in UNESCO and UNICEF.

At the outset, I wish to welcome Ms. Marie-Pierre Poirier, Regional Director of UNICEF, and Mr. Abdulaziz Almuzaini, Director of the UNESCO Office in Geneva. I would also like to acknowledge the presence of the experts on the panel who will be sharing their experience regarding advancements and drawbacks of girls' and women's right to education.

This is the first stage in the process of elaborating a general recommendation by the CEDAW Committee that will provide authoritative guidance to States parties on how to ensure full compliance with their obligations to respect, protect and fulfill the right of women and girls to education, particularly in the context of article 10 of the CEDAW Convention.

In recent decades, the international community has largely achieved consensus about the importance of an available, accessible, acceptable and quality education as the route to women's empowerment, as well as on the

need to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of education.

As we approach next year's Millennium Development Goal deadline, we know that there has been improvement in reducing gender disparity in schools, one of the targets of MDG3. However, we must also acknowledge that this overall trend masks pockets of shocking inequalities in a number of States and regions.

Moreover, despite this overall improvement in girls' access to education, women are still under-employed, underpaid and otherwise undermined – in fields ranging from their personal autonomy to participation in politics, their unequal domestic burdens and the far greater violence that they endure. This continuing imbalance of power between the sexes in the public domain underscores the fact that education has not significantly addressed the strategic needs of women as a group – partly due to entrenched patriarchal systems and harmful gender stereotypes.

Our primary concern must now be how we can advance the right to education, in order to facilitate the rights and strategic needs of girls and women. How can educational institutions help eliminate harmful stereotypes regarding the traditional roles of women and men? How can they best

promote girls' rights to make free choices regarding their fields of study and careers, and how can they facilitate girls' enjoyment of rights in their personal lives as well as in the political and economic domains?

We must also continue our drive to enable all girls to attend school. Currently more than 35 million girls do not. Two-thirds of these young women are from ethnic minorities. Many are excluded because of economic disadvantage, location or personal status. But there are also other factors. Girls are far more likely than boys to perform hours of unpaid work in the home, including care-giving, cooking and cleaning. Their parents are less likely to enroll them in school. Parents, teachers and counselors often do not support girls' academic participation vigorously, making them more likely to drop out. And even inside schools, girls may find they are subjected to violence or harassment, as well as a pervasive sense that they do not belong there.

An effective response to these challenges must build on human rights approach, engaging all stakeholders in the educational process, including government officials, teachers and administrators, parents and community members.

It is essential to devise an approach whereby the concept of the **right to**

education embraces **the rights within education** and **the rights through education**. Rights *within* education meaning that the education sector should embed human rights in all its processes and personnel. Rights *through* education, for girls should be learning personal and leadership skills that promote their effective participation in public life.

Today I am delighted to see such high level participation in this vital discussion with the CEDAW Committee. Together with the other treaty bodies, the Committee will continue addressing the obstacles to the full enjoyment of the right to education by girls and women. It is expected to adopt a general recommendation that will identify State obligations under article 10 so that they can be applied uniformly to all States parties – and so that States parties can be held accountable if they fail to implement them.

Excellencies,

You may have heard the phrase, "If one wing is broken, no one can fly."

Failure to respect rights of girls and women to education violates their rights as human beings. And furthermore, by breaking one of the two wings that keeps our societies moving forward, it holds everyone back.

Let us make that wing healthy and strong, so that our societies can soar forward.

Thank you.

