

MEDIA RELEASE

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Despite Progress, Girls Subjected to Violence and Discrimination

NEW YORK, 5 March 2007 – Violence against women and girls is one of the most extreme forms of inequality, UNICEF Executive Director Ann M. Veneman said today on the occasion of the 51st Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

“Despite progress, we continue to live in a world where millions of girls remain out of school, engaged in exploitative labor, are trafficked, are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and are targets of sexual violence,” Veneman said in advance of International Women’s Day on March 8.

Stressing the critical link between discrimination against girls and women and violence, Veneman drew attention to the sexual violence committed in armed conflict, trafficking, and practices such as honour killings, dowry crimes, early marriage, and female genital cutting/mutilation.

“In too many countries and regions, the plight of girls is ignored or denied,” Veneman said. “This leaves girls to suffer in silence and has a devastating effect on the well-being of families and communities.”

Veneman said education is a key to addressing discrimination and violence against girls and to helping achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Educated girls are better equipped to protect themselves against life-threatening diseases such as HIV/AIDS, are more likely to give birth to healthy babies who will survive and grow into adulthood, tend to delay marriage, and are more likely to have fewer children.

“Economic development is enhanced in societies where both girls and boys are educated,” Veneman said. “We need accelerated efforts to help ensure that girls go to school and can learn and study in safe environments.”

Those efforts must include abolishing the school fees that prevent many poor families from sending their daughters to school, providing sanitary facilities for girls in schools, supporting community-based early childhood development, and helping to protect girls against violence at school or on their way to class.

It is also critical that girls, including the most disadvantaged and marginalized girls, have safe spaces to be involved in recreational and learning activities without fear of violence or abuse. Men and boys also must be engaged in the fight to end discrimination and violence against girls.

“Men and boys can be powerful allies in the struggle for women’s and girls’ equality and in rejecting violence against girls and women,” Veneman said. “Achieving gender equality requires the participation of all of society to challenge the norms that allow girls and women to be devalued and denied.”

“It is long past time that countries, cultures and communities everywhere accept that it is in their own best interests to treat girls and women as equals,” Veneman said. “Common sense and economics alike tell us that a society cannot possibly marginalize half its population and expect positive outcomes.”

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About UNICEF

UNICEF is on the ground in 155 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world’s largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments.

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