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ADDIS ABABA GIRLS' FORUM SETS FOUNDATION FOR LEGISLATIVE INTERVENTION AGAINST SEXUAL ABUSE OF SCHOOLGIRLS

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia – Over 720 girls aged 14-19 years from 62 high schools participated in the first Addis Ababa Girls' Forum addressing the vulnerability of secondary schoolgirls to HIV/AIDS and laying the foundation for legislative intervention against sexual abuse.

The one-day event, held at the United Nations Conference Center on 19 June 2004, marked the culmination of three weeks of discussion held in all ten sub-cities of Addis Ababa. This was followed by a two-day consultation between 100 school representatives from the 62 schools with high-level officials of the City Government, including the Mayor. Discussions centered on HIV/AIDS and communication, sexual harassment in and around school, sex education in school, open dialogue regarding sex between parents and children, and guidance and counseling services in school.

The forum was organized by the Addis Ababa Women's Affairs Office in collaboration with the Addis Ababa City Government Mayor's Office, Addis Ababa HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Office, the Economic Commission for Africa's African Center for Gender and Development and UNICEF.

"The HIV/AIDS prevalence rate is significantly higher in girls of age 14-19 than boys," said Ms. Mekia Mohammed, Head of the Addis Ababa Women's Affairs Office. "We need to appreciate what this age group is passing through. Their innocence and limited knowledge about sex is being abused by older men, exposing them to unwanted pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. Protective measures need to be in place in order to make their future road smooth and increase their participation in overall development matters."

"We never discussed such questions openly regarding sexual harassment, HIV/AIDS and other problems that schoolgirls encounter," said 15-year-old Lidya Mekonnen from Meskayehezunan School. "This forum has helped us to build confidence in ourselves and to express ourselves in public. We wish to see results from this meeting. We are ready to be part of the solution and we are happy that Mayor Arkebe Oqubay has promised to fulfill our demands."

Over 70 per cent of the girls who participated in the consultation said they have experienced physical and verbal harassment in and around school by teachers, principals, guards, passersby and male students and that their reports go unheeded by the authorities. The girls recommended that sexual offenders receive severe penalties, teachers receive training on a code of conduct regarding sexual harassment, an

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independent ombudsperson be established in the schools and that teacher-student liaisons be legally prohibited.

Current communication strategies for HIV/AIDS are not youth-friendly or entertaining, forum participants asserted. They recommended more interactive, age specific and entertaining radio and TV programs designed with the full participation of youth, in addition to the promotion of girls' clubs.

The girls also indicated that there is little dialogue between parents and children on the subject of sex and HIV/AIDS and parents feel uncomfortable and lack the knowledge to effectively communicate with their children on these subjects. They recommended that forums should be organized for parents to discuss their role as parents in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Parent education should also take place via existing social associations, dramas and special publications.

Few teachers talk about HIV/AIDS and sex education is inadequate and limited to biology class. The forum recommended the creation of a special gender-specific class for sex education with a relevant curriculum and trained instructors.

The forum noted that guidance counselors in schools are primarily untrained males who are often themselves perpetrators of harassment against girls. The girls recommended that professional counselors, preferable female, should instead be placed in every school.

"I have heard the girl students express the special challenges they face on account of their gender at all levels of the educational process and environment," said Addis Ababa Mayor Arkebe Okubay. "The City Government is committed to improve the situations in schools and is working hard to seriously expand educational facilities of our school system that accommodate the specific needs of girl students. To do this we need to work in partnership with all."

The Addis Ababa City Government will continue consulting with the Bureau of Education and individual schools regarding a new curriculum for sex education in order to move forward with the implementation of the recommendations.

"Today, young women are much more affected by HIV/AIDS than their male counterparts," said Mr. Bruno Maes, UNICEF Officer-in-Charge. "The Addis Ababa Girls' Forum is an example of the kind of action we need to give girls the opportunity to share their perspectives, to frame key issues they face in their schools and their communities and to craft recommendations for policy change and programmatic and social actions. UNICEF looks forward to continuing collaboration with all partners to provide more meaningful opportunities for girls as leaders and participants in the fight against HIV/AIDS. UNICEF is committed to providing continued technical and financial support to the Addis Ababa City Government in this regard, and will continue its efforts towards empowering duty bearers, in this case teachers, principals and policy makers to enable them to meet their objectives."