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STATEMENT BY UNICEF REPRESENTATIVE BJORN LJUNGQVIST AT THE ETHIOPIAN TEENAGERS' FORUM ON GIRLS' EDUCATION 4 MARCH 2004

Distinguished office bearers of the Teenagers' Forum,
Fantanesh Tilahun, Head of the Women's Affairs Department at the Ministry of
Education,
Invited guests,
Teenagers,
Friends,

I can't tell you how pleased I am to be here with you today to open this fourth meeting of the Ethiopian Teenagers' Forum. I have been in Ethiopia now almost a year and you have had two meetings during that time and I have missed both of them. But I hope that starting with this one I won't miss any of the future ones. Thank you for giving me this opportunity.

It was about two weeks ago – you might have seen in the newspapers, that professor Jeffrey Sachs was here to discuss how Ethiopia would be able to reach the millennium development goals by 2015. And I was very happy to note that in those discussions that there was an emerging consensus that all those goals are important, but the goal of girls' education really has to be the first one to be achieved. And it is particularly important in Ethiopia because if you are not able to give girls a proper chance of basic education it means that half of your population in Ethiopia do not have a fair chance to participate in reaching those goals. In Ethiopia, more than in many other countries, the education of girls lags far behind that of boys and we have a lot of work ahead of us.

In his foreword to this year's State of the World's Children's Report on Girls, Education and Development Kofi Annan said, "...there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls." Educating girls benefits not only the girls themselves but provides benefits for their current and future families, and for societies at large. The education of girls contributes to higher economic productivity, lower infant mortality and morbidity, lower fertility rates, and the attainment of longer life expectancy for both men and women. Furthermore, there is greater likelihood that the children of educated girls will themselves be educated.

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What is the situation in Ethiopia? We note that Ethiopia has made tremendous strides in increasing school enrolment rates for girls from 30 per cent in 1996 to 51 per cent in 2002. This is a tremendous improvement, but it still means half of the girls do not enroll in school. This is where we also need to get your help, to understand why is that so. What do you think should be done by the MOE by other relevant authorities and by agencies like UNICEF to help bridge this gap in the enrolment status of boys and girls as quickly as possible because there is still a 20 percentage point gap that separates the enrolment rate of boys and girls nationally.

Now most of you are from Addis Ababa, and actually in Addis Ababa the rates are fifty-fifty with about the same number of girls and boys enrolling in school, and in fact continue together for the first four years of school. This situation changes in the second cycle of primary school and into secondary school where the ratio of girls to boys decreases with girls dropping out and their achievement falling behind those of boys. Why does that happen? We look forward to hearing your perspectives.

Ethiopia is one of the countries which are involved in the 25 by 2005 girls' education campaign, which is a major initiative to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education in 25 priority countries by 2005. UNICEF is committed to increase to actions in order to accelerate progress on girls' education

UNICEF works with the Ministry of Education and Regional Bureaus of Education to both increase overall enrolment rates for both boys and girls and to improve the quality of education. With the Girls' Education Initiative particular attention is given to decreasing the gap in girls' enrollment and reducing drop out rates. I hope you all have now heard that by 2015 we should have all girls and boys in Ethiopia successfully completing primary education. 2015 may sound far away, but if we do not start now we will not get there.

What is exciting for us is that this is the first time that we taken the issue to discuss with youth themselves. We should have done that before, but we are happy that you have all come here today so that you can help to give advice to the Ministry of Education and to ourselves on how we can do this. I am also particularly happy that we have here both boys and girls, so you can discuss what it is that makes your 'boy' friends and 'girl' friends perform differently in school. You know one another and you can compare how come you start together, then at the age of ten, twelve, fifteen things start to be different. What are the issues and what do you think you can do about it? What do you think we can do about it? And what do you think others can do about it?

I also want to recall the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children that was held two years ago. This was kind of a millennium meeting for children and young people. And in that meeting, all countries in the world supported a number of important goals, including girls' education, but even more importantly, they committed themselves to the

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principle that whenever we are discussing issues that concern young people we have to discuss with them. Young people should have a chance to give their ideas and contribute to the solutions. So, in that spirit, I think that this meeting is a very important one and that we should continue these opportunities, this forum for consultation.

I very much hope that you will have a successful day and I look very much forward to hear your recommendations and advice at the end of this day.

Thank you for inviting me.

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