

**Address by Dr. Nicholas Alipui**

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*Panel Discussion:*

**Adolescent girls: the girls left behind?  
Addressing discrimination and promoting their well being \_**

**Parliamentarians as Frontline Actors to Fulfill the Rights of Adolescent Girls**

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Madame Chair, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a great honour and immense pleasure to be here with you today. As I stand before you today, it seems possible that through a common vision, shared goals and partnership for humanity we can, together, contribute to a better world for the future. And my topic today will focus on that- the future...and how we must ensure that our choices and actions protect and empower a particular segment of our population that is critical to our collective future- adolescent girls.

Before I turn my attention to the main topic of my address, I would like to clearly note that UNICEF is very proud of its partnership with the IPU. Together, we have tackled some of the greatest challenges facing the world's children, from the impact of armed conflict and the worst forms of child labour to child trafficking and sexual exploitation. In the plenary session yesterday, we discussed the importance of addressing child survival and maternal health.

Let me now turn today to a topic that is core to UNICEF's mandate but also a particular issue which I believe in with great passion- the disadvantaged situation of many many adolescent girls and what we must do with urgency to redress their situation. My talk is hinged on statistics- but it is also based on what I have observed, both as a citizen of this continent and also through my experiences in other parts of the world.

It is absolutely clear that things **are** changing...and that we have made progress in reducing disparities between boys and girls worldwide. As much as we applaud progress, we have to note that in many parts of the world girls remain the largest percentage of children out of school. Young women represent 59 percent of the world's more than 130 million illiterate youth. They are the largest percentage of victims of physical, sexual, emotional abuse and economic exploitation. They are more likely to be trafficked, to disappear, and to die without being known and are particularly brutalized in situations of armed conflict.

And, **Why is that you may ask?** In a world where so much overall progress is being made, where we are seeing more children survive, where science and technology is advancing and reaching remote corners of the world, why do we have such a vulnerable group that endures hardship, discrimination, abuse and is often denied equal opportunities? Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to propose that so much of this is tied to **our socio-cultural norms, beliefs, and practices**- we are tying down our young girls and denying them equal rights and opportunities because in many of our societies we truly do not believe in equal rights... By this I mean while we often agree with the principles of universal rights, we are not practicing them in our day-to-day lives and interactions. And so what do ideals mean when they are not translated into basic acts of humanity, of respect, of acknowledgement of others, of supporting and protecting those who need it most?

Disparities in the way girls and boys are raised are at the root of many human rights violations against girls and women that we see today. Negative patriarchal practices and gender stereotypes favour boys and men, and discriminate against girls. The gender discrimination that shapes the live of girls and boys from their early years intensifies during adolescence. As opportunities open for boys, they often close for girls.

Doubly marginalised by virtue of being both females and children, adolescent girls are at risk of exposure to some of the world's most pervasive forms of discrimination and violence. Girls are up to three times more likely than boys to experience sexual abuse. They are the majority of child-sexual-exploitation victims worldwide, whether through informal prostitution or through trafficking into the commercial sex industry.

Conflicts continue to pose a huge threat to children, especially adolescent girls. In situations of armed conflict, girls are often the targets of sexual assault and sexual slavery, forced prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation, as well as of recruitment. We have read about and some of us have seen the deep physical and psychological scars such experiences leave on children and the unprecedented trauma and loss these situations represent for our communities.

## April 5 version

Let us move to HIV and AIDS. Young women aged 15-24 in Sub-Saharan Africa are 3 times more likely to be infected with HIV than young men. Girls and adolescents are more susceptible to HIV infection as they have less power to reject sexual advances than adults, and are more impacted by poverty, cultural and social attitudes which are some of the key drivers of the HIV pandemic.

Then there are the harmful tradition practices. Out of the eight harmful traditional practices identified in the UN Study on All Forms of Violence Against Women, five directly affect adolescent girls; namely, dowry-related violence, crimes in the name of honour, female genital mutilation/cutting, early marriage and forced marriage.

More than 50 million girls aged 17 or younger in developing countries are currently married and many more are at risk of child marriage. Child marriage not only impedes a girl's opportunity for education, it places her in life-threatening circumstances. Early childbearing significantly increases girls' risk for injuries, infections and disabilities and death. Pregnancy related deaths are known to be a leading cause of death for both married and unmarried girls between the ages of 15 and 19. Each year 66,000 girls aged 15-19 die from pregnancy-related complications globally. If this were not sobering in itself, we also know that young girls have an increased risk of contracting HIV if they are married off to older, more sexually experienced men.

And among this vulnerable group is yet an even more marginalized sub-set. They are the adolescent girls living on the margins of society, in families subsisting on less than one or two dollars a day, and in families that are homeless on account of war and natural disaster. They belong to socially-excluded ethnic and religious groups. They live in conflict affected areas, and are deprived of protection against HIV /AIDS and disability. They are girls who work as domestic help, or live on the streets or in institutions. These young girls are often "invisible," not reflected in our surveys or statistics- they truly are "the forgotten ones" who are struggling hard in the corners of the world with enormous human burden as we are gathered here today.

## April 5 version

Adolescent girls often face discrimination and violence in places where they should be protected— in the home, at school, and in their immediate community. The very people charged with protecting and supporting the rights of girls - parents, guardians, teachers or law enforcement officers – are often implicated in violence against girls. Yet societies often continue to accept this abuse- in the name of culture, tradition, beliefs, and social norms. It is not easy to change these things, I know, but we need to recognize how deep-rooted the origins of the problems are. We **need to understand the dynamics of socio-cultural transformations** and work with communities, local leaders, and with yourselves as key partners in dialogue with citizenry and in developing protective laws. Only in this way will we have lasting change.

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, we have a choice in front of us. There are more than 600 million adolescent girls in the developing world today. How do we all see them? Do we see them as a wonderful asset of society and the world? Do we see them as healthy and educated? Free from fear, free from violence, free from discrimination? Do we see the adolescent girl growing up to be an empowered citizen who can contribute to the progress of our countries and fulfill her own aspirations?

Or do we still see the adolescent girl left to her own fate, vulnerable to the injustices we see around?

I am confident that we all see the former- the adolescent girl as the steward of our collective future, our world. But **why is it that we still are no investing enough** in the adolescent girl? With the right opportunities, girls will marry later, have fewer children, be able to better care for and nurture the next generation and will invest 90 percent of her income back into her family. Yet our statistics indicate that less than half a cent of every international development dollar is spent on adolescent girls.

But we are gathered here because we have a responsibility – we believe we can change things. With that premise to start with, I would like to suggest three key ways that you, as Parliamentarians, can indeed improve the lives of adolescent girls.

**First, invest in educating adolescent girls. This is still the best strategy for eliminating discrimination against girls and breaking the inter-generational cycle of poverty.**

There is growing recognition in the international community that even in the poorest countries primary schooling alone will not provide sufficient preparation for adult work and family responsibilities in a rapidly globalizing world. Secondary education is singularly effective in delaying the age at which a young woman first gives birth and can enhance freedom of movement, maternal health, economic and political participation. So, we need even more girls in secondary and tertiary education.

As parliamentarians, you can use your role as lawmakers and your budgetary oversight functions to find the ways and means for extending educational opportunities to all adolescent girls, without regard to their social, economic, ethnic, or maternal status. You can give particular attention to girls in excluded groups and marginalized situations.

**Second, promote an end to violence against girls, in their homes, in their schools and in their communities, especially in situations of armed conflict when rape and sexual violence is increasingly being used as a weapon of war.**

You can work to support child friendly schools and communities which provide safe and protective physical and emotional environments for adolescent girls.

Using the power of Parliament, you can ensure that law enforcement agencies, health care providers and community leaders are aware of their responsibility to protect all girls from all forms of violence and discrimination, and to provide support to those who are victims of violence.

You have a platform to initiate public discussion about discriminatory gender attitudes and practices, including those justified by religion and tradition. You can lead public campaigns to promote ‘zero tolerance’ of discrimination against girls.

**April 5 version**

**Third, build partnerships with the private sector and government to ensure that girls have an equal opportunity to make a successful transition from school to work.**

Our research shows that girls have a more difficult time than boys in accessing decent work in the formal economy. Girls need support to prepare themselves to participate in the broader spheres of public life.

You can work within your own constituencies to make sure that the voices of girls are heard. Building the life skills of adolescent girls is an important step in enabling them to participate in public life, including the economic life of their countries.

**In conclusion,** Madame Chair, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

We collectively must recognize that there is a long road ahead of us in ensuring that all the young girls and children of this world have equal opportunities to become healthy and vibrant citizens of tomorrow. As difficult as it may be to change deep-rooted practices, attitudes, beliefs...as tough as it may be to have those budget discussions that are child-centred...as challenging as it may be to enforce laws and bring justice...it can be done, I believe. As parliamentarians, you are uniquely positioned to make a tremendous contribution for a better world for young girls, for all children, and for the future of our world. It is everyone's right to have basic dignity, to get a chance to thrive, to learn, to be safe, to make choices and to contribute to society- you all can ensure that these are the rights of adolescent girls too.

I thank you for your kind attention and look forward to working with you across organizations, countries, and continents to make the changes that must happen.