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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
Conference of the NGO Committee on UNICEF
"Education for All Girls"

"Closing the Gender Disparity in Education:
A Human Right, A Social Gain"

New York
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Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

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Closing the Gender Disparity in Education:
A Human Right, A Social Gain

It is certainly a privilege to address this NGO Conference on one of the most important issues on the international agenda: reducing the worldwide gender disparity in education. The goals have already been set, and set very clearly, in the Declaration of the World Conference on Education For All and at the World Summit for Children. These goals are unmistakable: "To ensure access to, and improve the quality of, education of girls and women, and to remove every obstacle that hampers their active participation". The basic purpose is to eliminate the current gender disparity in education by the year 2000. With the global political consensus on these goals, it is time now to put all our efforts and energy in ensuring that these goals are fully implemented.

We in UNICEF are totally committed to this objective. The apartheid of gender is the cruelest and the most pervasive discrimination of all, yet it has not yet generated a sustained condemnation on a global scale. More than a million girls die each year simply because they are born female. If the new world order is to usher in a just world, then this apartheid of gender too must go. And for that to happen, girls' education must be seen as a critical empowering tool.

During the past twenty years, significant progress has been made in the status of education worldwide. The average literacy rate for all developing countries has risen from 43 per cent in 1970 to 65 per cent in 1990. The average gross primary school enrolment rate for all developing countries also has risen from 83.5 per cent in 1970 to 98 per cent in 1990. But within these averages lie the regional differences, economic and class differences and, most distressingly, the gender differences.

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The statistics are well known. Today there are nearly one billion adults who cannot read and write, two-thirds of whom are women, and most of whom live in three regions: South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. In at least 29 countries, less than 30 per cent of women are literate. Two-thirds of the 130 million children who have no access to primary schools are girls. During 1986-89, the gender gap in primary school enrolment in South Asia was 29 per cent, in Sub-Saharan Africa 20 per cent, and in the Middle East 18 per cent.

Also well known are the research findings that show close links between female education and the broad social and economic benefits that accrue to a nation. Over many years and in many countries and across the board among different socio-economic groups, the education of women has been shown to be associated with lower rates of child mortality, improvement of child care and nutrition, acceptance of family planning, reduction of average family size, literacy of the succeeding generation and improvement of women's income-earning capability.

There is an overwhelming moral imperative to equalize educational opportunities between girls and boys. Education is an empowering tool. It is a moral duty for every nation to empower all its citizens with knowledge and ability to improve their social and economic situation and to exercise their political rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child -- which entered into force in 1990 and is already the law in 115 countries -- "recognizes the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development". It further defines this right by recognizing the rights of all children to education on the basis of equal opportunity with the aim of preparing the child "in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance and equality of sexes".

When girls are denied these rights, the consequences can go from reduced self-esteem to imprisonment in a life of submissive drudgery and even to the loss of life, as they are denied the knowledge they need to attend to their own health.

Most governments now agree that girls' and women's education is a vital element in achieving universal education. But often national policies do not seem to be enough. For although there are some countries where education for every child has not yet been made compulsory by law, at least 75 percent of countries in every region of the world has some compulsory education policy. The challenge is not in passing yet more legislation but in translating existing policies into action.

All of us together need to explore: What are the essential steps that we must design in order to redress this unconscionable injustice that has been going on for centuries? Let me identify five steps.

First, in response to the 1990 World Summit for Children Plan of Action, more than 120 countries are now engaged in the preparation of national programmes of action. Girls' education should receive its proper high priority in these national plans. All countries should be persuaded to translate the global goals for girls' education, adapted by each country

according to its own situation and needs, into their national planning targets, to cost them fully, to integrate them in their policy and administrative framework, and to make a political commitment at the highest level to achieve them as quickly and as efficiently as possible. NGOs can play a major role in creating and maintaining pressures for such national action.

Second, the ultimate objective of our efforts can be no less than a full integration of girls into the education mainstream. Mainstreaming girls' education in the formal sector, and not marginalization in non-formal/informal channels, is the only realistic, long-term strategy. By adopting a few selected strategies, such as making schools easily accessible to girls, hiring female teachers, and reducing both direct and opportunity costs of schooling for girls, it is possible to make the formal system more responsive to girls' special needs and concerns. But the mainstreaming strategy has to be backed up by political commitment and supported by administrative machinery for implementation. Zimbabwe offers a dramatic illustration of accomplishment in the 1980s.

Third, while efforts at full mainstreaming continue and as long-term arrangements are being made to extend the facilities of the formal system, many transitional "Bailey bridges" may have to be built in the meanwhile, using all non-formal channels to advance the basic cause of providing education to all, to make progress where progress can be made in order to enrich the lives of the current generation of girls. As you know, BRAC in Bangladesh, has been successfully providing primary education to children, most of whom are girls, through two flexible models, offering appropriate curriculum and involving the communities in decision-making. There are other examples such as Cheli Beti in Nepal, mosque schools in several Islamic countries and home schools in Pakistan.

Fourth, it will be necessary, I believe, to use the full potential of the "third channel" of communication in this process of providing knowledge and skills to girls and women. The use of mass media, audio-visual technology and all other instruments of traditional and modern communication can be potent weapons in the fight to capture the attention of societies toward the educational deprivation of girls and women and how the whole society pays a heavy price in terms of higher child mortality, higher fertility and lower economic productivity as a result.

Participation of girls in the educational system is the result of parental demand for girls' schooling and public and private sectors' supply of services that respond to that demand. Parental demand is a direct reflection of cultural, social and economic circumstances as well as traditions and practices. This perception of need can be influenced, not only by making supply of educational services responsive to parental concerns and economic situation, but also by mounting advocacy through all channels of communication so that people are motivated, societies begin to change, and the demand for girls' education becomes an imperative.

Fifth, we must build a network of cooperation among international agencies, national governments and NGOs for the promotion of girls'

education. Through regular policy coordination, sharing of experience and information and collaborating on joint projects, resources can be used most efficiently and the cause can be served. Moreover, additional financial resources need to be mobilized through restructuring both national and aid budgets in favour of basic education, and through using a part of reduced military budgets specifically for basic education. Availability of additional resources for basic education will enable countries, donors and NGOs to respond to gender concerns in the allocation of resources.

Let me now describe to you briefly what UNICEF has been doing to promote girls' education in addition to such actions as joining with many others in promoting the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the World Summit for Children, and the Jomtien Education For All Conference, which have improved the overall climate for promoting the well being of girls.

Improving educational opportunities for girls and women has always been one of the major objectives of UNICEF's support for basic education. UNICEF's Child Survival and Development strategies of the 1980s emphasized the vital link between mother's education and children's health. Lessons on health, nutrition and sanitation have been incorporated in most basic education programmes. In area-based integrated services programmes where women form the majority of beneficiaries, literacy training is one of the important components of programmes. Literacy learning is an important condition of many income-generating activities for women.

UNICEF's recent programmatic interventions to promote girls' education have included such activities as training of female teachers; preparing gender sensitive curriculum; provision of water and sanitation in schools; supporting establishment of community or satellite schools for girls; day care centres for younger siblings; diagnostic studies on the situation of the girl child; and preparation of communication strategies and materials such as Facts For Life for advocacy. Most adult literacy programmes supported by UNICEF focus on illiterate women as the target population.

In reviewing Board submissions and annual reports from country offices, our Headquarters Education Cluster makes sure that girls' education receives adequate attention in countries with gender disparity in education. Several policy tools and advocacy documents have been prepared to assist in the task.

In inter-agency meetings, girls' education figures prominently with UNICEF playing an active role. For example, in two important upcoming inter-agency meetings, girls' education will be one of the topics for discussion. In May at the Joint Committee on Education meeting in Paris, UNICEF and UNESCO are presenting a joint paper on strengthening field-level collaboration in female education. In June, for a meeting organized by the Development Assistance Committee of OECD countries on Basic Education: Donor Roles and Responsibilities, UNICEF is preparing a comprehensive paper on Strategies to Promote Girls' Education.

UNICEF, together with UNESCO, is launching a new initiative in the nine most populous developing countries with the largest number of illiterate population, most of whom are women, and the largest number of out-of-school

children, most of whom are girls. These countries are Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan. A major and intensive effort to achieve the goals of universalization of access and achievement in primary education and reduction of adult illiteracy in these countries would mark a decisive step toward solving the educational problems of almost two-thirds of the world's population, and thus significantly reducing the worldwide gender gap in education. Some of these countries are among the ones you will be discussing here in this conference. You thus have before you an opportunity to examine concrete action plans that you can take back to your governments and organizations in order to make a significant impact on this problem.

None of this will be possible without the grass roots efforts of all of you. I sincerely believe that NGOs can play the most vital role in this area of eliminating gender disparity. It is you who can raise the awareness on this issue at the political and social level. It is you who can implement some of the programmes in the most cost-effective manner. It is you who can bring the pressure on national governments and international donors not to forget this issue in a crowded developmental agenda. It is you who can form the new alliance for change.

At Jomtien I said that if empowerment of people through knowledge is an important goal of basic education, then there is a strong case for "affirmative action" in support of expanding basic education for girls and women, the victims of age-old discrimination in most societies. This is an article of faith for UNICEF, because we know from our own experience that all the gains that have been made in the past decade in saving the lives of millions of children and improving the health and well-being of children and mothers cannot be sustained and cannot be substantially advanced further without primary education, literacy and basic knowledge for better living for girls and women.

We have been discussing the fact that women are second class citizens for a number of years now. Apartheid based on race has been passionately decried, and radical progress is now being made to overcome it. The time has come to eradicate this equally shameful form of apartheid based on gender. So let us all work together in this urgent cause.