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**Future perspectives on the promotion of gender equality:
Through the eyes of young women and men**

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* The paper has been reproduced as submitted.

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Ms. Chairperson, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

“If my voice shakes, it is because I am excited; if my voice trembles, it is because I am proud, proud to stand before you.” Although these words hold true for what I am feeling at this moment, they were the words used by a very wise professor back in 1991 through which he addressed over 2,000 young people protesters at the University of Belgrade. I was quite young at that time, but I remember well the grave cold of a marble auditorium, the tension of the air, and the overwhelming feeling of gratitude that at least one adult understood, empathized and was a true partner in our efforts to better our society through overall advancement, to better every individual’s existence, by providing opportunities for every one of us, and to give us a chance to live transparent, healthy lives, free of war, corruption, abuse, inequalities, all of which were every day parts of our lives.

One more thing that I remember from that distant day is how much influence, we, the young people, had. Educated, organized, involved – we were a determining factor of the development of our country. Still, Serbia and Montenegro in the early 1990s is only one example of the positive influence that young people can have, if only granted the chance. Only, at that time, we were not handed the opportunity to speak, we made it. Because we had a vision, we had a goal, and we had a common conviction that what we were reaching for was a matter of life or death.

Is gender equality a matter of death and life? At the break of the XXI century, pregnancy is a leading cause of death. The tragedy is that almost all of these deaths – an estimated 529,000 a year – are preventable. A recent, still unpublished study by Population Council suggests that in rural Amhara region of Ethiopia, 14 per cent of girls are married by age 10, and 39 per cent are married by age 15. Only five per cent of girls know their husband before getting married; 15 per cent of girls know about the marriage before it happens; and only 20 percent of girls consent to be married. Of the married girls, 81 per cent are forced to have sex against their will by their significantly older husbands.

Rape is a weapon of war. It is a crime against humanity. Are we in a war, a gender-based war, then? Why are we not on streets? Why are we cordially exchanging glances and carefully organizing panels, when ground is burning underneath our feet?

It is critical that we remember that gender inequality is not an issue of concern for developing countries only. For example, as many as two to four million women are battered each year in the United States; at least 170,000 of these require hospitalization or doctors' attention. In this country, approximately one third of all murdered victims are murdered by their intimate partners. The North is not that much more advanced when it comes to equal opportunities for women in the workplace, when it comes to gender-based violence, when it comes to the nature in which women are presented in the media.

We know that gender-based discrimination starts at birth. We understand that only through involving everyone, people from all strata of life, with all religious beliefs, from all professional fields, of all ages, and finally, only through prescribing both women and men to join us on this road, will we be able to arrive at our goal of mutual equality.

Yet, what will that visionary place look like? What do I, as a young man, imagine the world to be like, when true equality strikes. The truth is, to men, the world is equal. The privilege of being born a man is assumed, so embedded, that it first came as a surprise to hear women speak of their experiences. Even in countries where gender inequalities are more extreme, men often do not view them as injustices. We perceive them as a normal state of being. That is how we were socialized by our fathers and grandfathers, and by our mothers and grandmothers. Thus, the perfect world, the world without violence, the world without violence against women, the world lacking gender inequalities would not diminish the options man have, but would simply enhance those of women, making them the equal partners which they should be.

I will present to you some recent examples of what UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, has pursued, which may be easily replicated. In efforts to implement the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population Development; the Beijing Platform for Action, and with an objective of reaching the Millennium Development Goals, UNFPA focuses on building national capacities in working with young people. The Fund has made young people a crucial part of our agency's decision-making body, and it has worked hard to assure that gender equality is continuously reinforced, both directly and indirectly, through media programming, non-governmental organizations and governmental sponsorships.

In order to assure that youth, both boys and girls, are at the decision-making table in regards to all policies of the Fund, UNFPA has established a Youth Advisory Board, which provides input to UNFPA on its regional and global work. The youth selected to take part in the Advisory Board are a select group often representing global or regional networks, or individuals who have shown an outstanding dedication and understanding of the mission of UNFPA.

Young people from developing countries are widely under-represented within the United Nations system and do not receive the same opportunity through internships to learn about the UN and receive skills building future leaders. Thus, UNFPA has established a *Special Youth Programme* through which interns up to the age of 20 from developing countries are recruited and provided an opportunity to join UNFPA Headquarters in New York for a paid internship for up to 6 months, upon which they return to their home countries and continue working for additional three months with UNFPA's Country Offices. The objective of this program is to give youth the opportunity to be engaged in the design of policy development and programming, as well as to provide them with an insight into the daily operations of a UN organization. As the internship goes along, the young interns are expected to gain skills regarding how to address population, sexual and reproductive health, gender and HIV/AIDS issues, especially in the context of achieving the Millennium Development Goals as relevant to young people. Once more, the number of men and women is strictly observed, and in the selection process both a young woman and man are short-listed from each region, before a decision is made.

We, the young people, ask to be a part of the process, which shapes our lives. Young men must be at the head of the gender equality promotion efforts in order for them to take in. Today, it is clear that if real and lasting challenges are to be assured, men and boys must be involved and must take responsibility for promoting sexual and reproductive health, eliminating gender-based violence, and ensuring HIV/AIDS prevention and care. Our roles in the families, particularly as fathers and caregivers are crucial for any kind of gender-related advancement. Thus, UNFPA is partnering with EngenderHealth in South Africa and Instituto Promundo from Brazil to (1) outline lessons learned in programming for boys and men and (2) identify gaps, such as what programmers should know to effectively engage boys and men in supporting gender equality and equity. Some areas that require special attention are (a) how to engage boys and men in becoming active voices in condemning violence against women, (b) how to work effectively with boys and men in adopting positive attitudes towards use of condoms for HIV prevention, and (c) how to work with boys and men in sharing household and parenting responsibilities.

UNFPA is also partnering with the Margaret Sanger Center International to produce a gender equality promotion guide, which will first help programmers to understand the importance of changing certain aspects of traditional gender systems as they pertain to sexual and reproductive health with a particular focus on young people. It will then take programme planners through the phases of programme development and provide practical guidance on how to use a gender equality promotion perspective in each phase of program planning. The Guide will provide a rich array of examples that illustrate how to integrate this perspective in clinical, educational and media, and advocacy-focused projects.

UNFPA is spearheading an initiative on married adolescents. Despite a shift toward later marriage in many parts of the world, 82 million girls in developing countries who are now aged 10 to 17 will be married before their 18th birthday. Worldwide, some

14 million women and girls between ages 15 and 19, both married and unmarried, give birth each year. Still, pregnancy is a leading cause of death for young women in this age group worldwide, with complications of childbirth and unsafe abortion being the major factors. Thus, UNFPA and UNIFEM are partnering with the Population Council and the International Planned Parenthood Federation to conduct research and learn how to increase social and economic opportunities for girls in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and India.

UNFPA believes that social and cultural realities in communities present opportunities, not merely challenges, for advancing development goals and human rights. This is why UNFPA is working with communities and local, religious and cultural leaders to share knowledge and listen to their experiences. For example, in Uganda, since 1995, UNFPA has partnered with the Sabinu Elders Association and has worked to enhance reproductive health of women and young girls and to eliminate the harmful practice of female genital mutilation/cutting, while promoting local cultural and social values. As a result, the number of girls subjected to these practices has decreased.

Some regional initiatives, which may be easily replicated, include UNFPA's Y-PEER, the Youth Peer Education Electronic Resources. What started as a network and capacity building initiative of scattered and uncoordinated youth peer education programmes in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, has become an example of integrated behaviour change communication and information and communication technologies, which utilize the power of boys and girls alike to promote gender equality and prevent HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections. The initiative currently consists of thousands of young people, trained according to the same standards, supervised and supported by non-governmental organizations, and often by national governments, such as it is the case with Serbia and Montenegro. Y-PEER is currently expanding, and is available in the Arab States region and in other regions as well.

Another practical example, which places young people as an equal partner is the African Youth Alliance (AYA), with an objective of improving adolescent reproductive health and reducing the spread of HIV/AIDS. AYA is a four-country effort operating in Botswana, Ghana, Uganda and Tanzania. As a collaborative effort between Pathfinder International, the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health, and UNFPA, AYA's issues of consideration include reduction in rates of HIV/AIDS, other STIs and pregnancy among young people, promotion of the delay of sexual debut, and, among already sexually active youth, the use of condoms and other contraceptives, elimination of harmful traditional practices and forced and coerced sex.

The Reproductive Health Initiative for Young People in Asia (RHIYA) continues the successful collaboration between UNFPA, the European Union, and European and local non-governmental organizations towards improving sexual and reproductive health of the most vulnerable populations in South and South East Asia. This initiative focuses exclusively on improving the reproductive and sexual health of youth and adolescents, with a strong emphasis on gender equality and equity. RHIYA stands as an example of youth-centered and youth-led initiative, which embeds the principles of gender equality

within its functioning, and which in turn promotes gender equality and equity through its programming.

The power of media in promoting gender equality and equity is un-debatable. Thus, UNFPA partnered with MTV's *Staying Alive Campaign*, which concentrates on prevention of HIV/AIDS globally, in order to assure gender sensitive programming on MTV's channels around the world. The theme of *Staying Alive's* programming in both 2004 and 2005 is gender equality promotion, responsibilities of men in gender equality and equity promotion and addressing violence against women.

Finally, UNFPA is supporting the *Faces of Young People and the Millennium Development Goals Initiative*, during 2005. Together with other partners, UNFPA will work with young people from around the globe to document their lives as they relate to the Millennium Development Goals through photojournalism. Young people, both girls and boys, will be provided with a platform to communicate their life stories and tell us the issues of their concern, including gender inequality, and violence against women, including unequal educational or work opportunities. The photographs taken will be shown at the United Nations Secretariat between August and October 2005 and advocacy materials such as booklets and brochures will be printed and disseminated, communicating why investing in young people will help us reach the Millennium Development Goals, including gender equality and equity.

Ms. Chairperson, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hope that you will remember that wise professor I talked to you about in the beginning. I am proud to say that my father, that same Professor, is in this hall today. And with him, is my mother. Together, they carried our family through wars and bombings, through rich and poor, through pitfalls and triumphs. And, Ladies and Gentlemen, together, they managed. On my 23rd birthday, I became one of the youngest lecturers at Columbia University. On my 26th birthday, I became the youngest professional to get hired at the UNFPA Headquarters. My parents had a vision. Together, they had a commitment for their children, and together they gave me the opportunity I was wise enough to take. This is the type of support and guidance that all young people should have from their caregivers.

In conclusion, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is I, as an individual, who makes a decision, but it is we collectively who must make the commitment at the depth of our existence that we will make the opportunity, that we will give birth to ideas, options, to the future, through the sun and rain, both North and South, for gender equality and equity for all.

I thank you for your attention.