

## UNICEF:

### **Early childhood care key to gender equality**

CAIRO, 13 November 2006 – UNICEF today called on governments and others committed to universal education and gender equality to remember that the earliest years are the most critical for children’s development. If many of the Millennium Development Goals are to be reached, the children’s agency warned, the cycle of negative gender stereotypes must be broken earlier in a child’s life rather than later.

“Gender equality must be addressed right from the beginning of life,” said Dr. Rima Salah, UNICEF Deputy Executive Director. “Huge steps can be made to empower girls if we begin the movement for gender equality in those first years of a child’s life.”

Dr. Salah’s comments came at the closing of the United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI) partnership meeting in Cairo. Members of UNGEI include representatives from several UN agencies, donor governments and non-governmental organizations that have come together to work toward gender equality in education.

The majority of the estimated 115 million children not attending school around the world are girls, a startling statistic that will have negative repercussions on an entire generation.

Girls who are kept out of schools are not only denied their own right to education, but if they later become mothers, they are more likely to raise children who remain uneducated, unvaccinated and more likely to contract HIV/AIDS, the children’s agency emphasized at a meeting here.

Universal primary education for all boys and girls is one of eight time-bound Millennium Development Goals endorsed by the international community. It is closely linked to the goal to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women. Interconnected with the six other goals, empowering girls and women, in and out of school, is clearly linked to global development and achieving the MDG targets by 2015.

The theme of the UNGEI meeting, “Gender and Early Childhood Care and Education,” placed particular emphasis on supporting families and gender-focused policies and scaling up of quality early childhood care programmes. Quality programmes focus on well-trained teachers, well-informed parents, and child-centered community care.

Furthermore, by covering pre-school and parenting techniques to school nutrition and breastfeeding advice, these programmes are particularly beneficial to the children who need them the most: girls living in poverty. Girl children may be required to care for younger siblings – a responsibility that prevents them from getting an education of their own. Early childhood care programmes are key in closing this discrimination

gap. When younger siblings are in pre-school programmes, their older sisters are free to pursue their own studies. And by setting children out early on the road to learning, early childhood education can be instrumental in breaking the cycle of poverty and preparing children for success in school.

It is particularly fitting that the UNGEI meeting should take place in Egypt, which -- with the leadership of First Lady H.E. Suzanne Mubarak, has been an early advocate for ensuring quality education to girls. Egypt unveiled a Girls' Education Initiative in 2000 under Mrs. Mubarak's guidance. Girls' education was designated as Egypt's top development priority in 2000; by 2007, the government has pledged to close the gender gap Egypt's schools.

"What young children learn now and what happens to them now will influence them for the rest of their life," said Erma Manoncourt, UNICEF's Representative in Egypt. "The earliest years are the most determinant of the child's psychosocial and cognitive development."

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#### **About UNICEF**

For 60 years UNICEF has been the world's leader for children, working on the ground in 156 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world's largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments.

#### **For more information:**

Wolfgang Friedl: +(962) 79 573 2745 [wfriedl@unicef.org](mailto:wfriedl@unicef.org)

Simon Ingram: +(20) 12 214 2567 [singram@unicef.org](mailto:singram@unicef.org)