

*In the name of Allah, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful*

Speech by Ambassador Musheera Khattab to the United Nations Roundtable on Early Childhood

The Convention on Child Rights, which all our countries have ratified and were committed to taking all measures to implement, views children as stakeholders and early childhood as a critical stage of realizing child rights. In Egypt, in recognition of the critical nature of this age group, the President has accorded considerable attention to child rights in the early childhood stage in the Second Presidential Decade of the Egyptian Child. The Decade sets as a goal to enroll by 2010 60 percent of the children within this age group into educational programs. In 2004, the Child Right Today Committee designated the year for discussing the issue of child rights in the stage of early childhood. In 2005, the Committee issued a General Comment on the issue, defining the stage of early childhood as starting from birth up to pre-school stage, including the interim period leading to school. The Committee agreed that it is the stage below the age of eight. It also asserted the importance of dealing with the child, right from the early moments of his life, as an active social actor, who has interests, potential and weaknesses that makes in need of a special type of protection, care, guidance and support in the exercise of his rights. Here, we have to note that children as individuals have substantial variations among themselves and it is necessary to respect the unique experiences specific to each child and the surrounding influences, constituting his growth. Children also differ in what those around expect him to do and how far the surrounding environment affects his growth. In this area, cultural norms, customs and traditions have a positive as well as a negative impact on the enjoyment by a child of his rights. An example is what the society expects, at birth, of a male or female newborn and the social roles for which a child is prepared since the first moments of birth. Here also, a child's weakness is most evident in the face such impact, including for example discrimination within the family between male and female members, in what called gender ....and other matters determining child's role in society, some of which constitute violations of child rights in the stage of early childhood, including his right to protection against discrimination.

There is outstanding importance for drawing up national policies, enacting laws, training staff and conducting research focusing on child rights in the stage of early childhood, taking into consideration child's emerging capacities and his gradual enjoyment, without discrimination,

of his rights guaranteed by law. Indeed, we have to direct redoubled attention to marginalized categories, including girls in particular.

However, we have to indicate here that the enforcement of child rights in the stage of early childhood cannot be carried out by one single entity that must work on all themes and aspects involved in early childhood development. We do need concerted efforts by several other entities. This requires coordination among them, in order to ensure the best interest of the child is being realized in an integrated manner to be accurately reflected in a national policy for early childhood development. This should be a policy that is sensitive to girls' needs, coordinates and join efforts of all partners in the fields of health, nutrition, education, protection and others. We do need to make entities responsible for coordination concerned also with accountability, monitoring and evaluation, We equally need to call for the predominance of accountability culture as part of human rights, This is the mission entrusted to the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood, the national authority concerned with the rights of children and mothers. Experience has shown that coordination entities must be entrusted also with accountability and evaluation. The monitoring and evaluation culture, while observing quality represent one of the most important strategies of action of the NCCM.

I would like here to stress the package of rights a child enjoys at this stage of his life that are indivisible and interdependent. We need to stress the gravity of this stage of a child's life. We need also to remind that children at this stage of their lives are worthy of respect as stakeholders. They are active citizens within the family, school and society and have interests, concerns and points of view. In order to exercise their rights, they need physical and psychological care and sensitive guidance, they need time and space to exercise their right to playing and recreation and explore what is going on around them. Through this they can exercise their right to learning. This can be made only if a comprehensive national strategy for early childhood development has been developed, executive policies drawn up, laws to guarantee implementation. Most important of all is to develop a national plan of implementation, ensure solemn and independent monitoring and evaluation; all of which are essential factors to ensure quality service.

It is important that this is done within the framework of a set of principles, including a child's right to freely express his opinion, his right to have such opinion taken into consideration in taking decisions affecting child's life in manner appropriate to the child according to his

emerging capacities, best interest of the child, his right to life and protection against harmful practices.

A child starts to exercise his right to express his opinion within the family, at school and in all community institutions. It is important to train adults dealing with children in listening to child, respecting his dignity and views, that adult should demonstrate readiness, patience and creativity in adapting and readjusting their own acts and views in response to children's views, interests and level of understanding according their preferred mode of communication. Complementary to this the important principle guaranteed by the CRC of the right to enjoy all rights without discrimination on any account and there once again rises the importance of according special attention to girls.

#### Education during early childhood

Education during early childhood is a highly important issue that is related to a child's right to the highest levels of development. As defined by Article 29 of CRC, education shall aim at developing to the maximum possible limit a child's personality, and mental and physical skills and capacities. In other words, this means to empower child by promoting his energies and educational and other skills, his human dignity, his self-respect and self-confidence. This all should be done in a child-focused manner. Importantly, this should be done through guaranteeing child's right to recreation and play. This is an important right at this stage of a child's life as it can be affected by limited opportunities available for children to meet, play and interact with each others within a child-focused and psychological-pressure-free environment. This reflects the importance of mainstreaming human rights at stage of life and once again there arise girl's right to enjoy these rights on an equal basis and with no discrimination.

In Egypt, specifically in the interest of these categories, the Prime Minister who acts also as chairman of NCCM, assigned a meeting on July 27, 2005, attended by ministers concerned and governors to discuss ways of implementing goals set forth in the Second Presidential Decade of the Egyptian Child. As the percentage of children enrolled in these programs is slightly in excess of 13 percent, we are required to redouble efforts to achieve the objectives set by the President. The decision by the Minister of Education to integrate kindergartens into the stage of compulsory education and the ministry's plan, floated in today's papers, to absorb children in the stage of early childhood come as a laudable step that will enable us to achieve the goals of the Second Presidential Decade of the Egyptian Child. I pray to Allah that the ministry will be able to provide

financial and human resources and training programs necessary to provide high-quality education that can attract marginalized categories, which usually drop out to labor market or to fall prey to other forms of exploitation.

Another important issue I want to address is the role of the private sector as a service provider in this area, the support to be given thereto by the state, the private sector's responsibilities while providing service through respecting and realizing child's rights set forth in CRC as well as national laws and documents, the responsibility for training professionals dealing with children and ensuring appropriate financial compensation for them. Here, we must recall that the role of private sector complements rather than substitutes that of the state. However, the state is committed to controlling and the ensuring quality of service provided by the state, in such a way as to guarantee child's rights and best interest. We should not forget that modern information technology provided opportunities that should be maximized.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Education during early childhood plays a critical role as a means of child protection in distress.

There are children living in difficult circumstances, sometimes attributed to failures in relations with parents or care providers. Other children live in a family environments dominated by violence, poverty or other risks faced by children at this critical stage of development. At this stage, children remain unable to understand, deal with and resist the harmful impact of these circumstances. The risks surrounding those children are aggravated as their parents or care providers fail to provide the care they need. Here, we refer particularly to children who are victims of violence, those deprived of parental care; those with disabilities, who need to equally enjoy all their rights, particularly the right to express their opinion and to participate and integrate in society. There are also children who are victims of employment, particularly the worst forms; girls who are prepared right from birth only for marriage or domestic service and children, who are prepared right from birth for employment. This is an express violation of their right to education and health care. Children are vulnerable to commercial and sexual exploitation when they are forced to exercise beggary. More than any others, those children need at the initial years of their age good-quality education that protects them against exploitation and inculcates into them a sense of integrity. We do need to establish a solemn data base , to conduct more research from a human

right perspective, particularly the right to participation and expression of opinion and to develop training programs for teachers and all staff in educational institutions oriented to children in the stage of early childhood.

One of the pioneering experiments of NCCM led by Her Excellency Mrs. Mubarak is the National Girls' Education Initiative that aims to narrow the gender gap in primary education, to provide the right to good-quality education for all. Such is an education that is active and girl- focused and arms girls with self-confidence and prepares them to build their families and society. The initiative has its own methodology which is underpinned by several bases, chief of which are societal participation, bottom-up planning, effective partnership between the public sector, private sector, civil society and local community (public-private partnership). In addition, monitoring, evaluation and databases have been completed. In recognition of the importance of this stage of life as the foundation stone for human development, the NCCM has decided to adopt the same methodology in dealing with the issue of early childhood development. This is the stage where the basic features of human personality are shaped, where a child starts to shape an image of himself and others in society that affect both himself and others for ever. To ensure quality, NCCM has finalized and tested working standards in this regard.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Success in early childhood development is prerequisite for all other successful developmental interventions made by NCCM and other parties concerned with childhood and motherhood issues.

Building early childhood databases is indeed an inevitable necessity for promoting work in this field. The data already available is insufficient and does not reach out to small villages and hamlets, which should have priority interest and support. Programs and programs to provide should be new, innovative and integrated. Support for this issue should be given not only through conventional kindergartens we all know, but also through various forms of care, in which families participates, in addition to the role of NGOs, local communities and volunteers.

Well-informed media has an essential role to play in this issue as well as in the system of changing anti-egalitarian orientations for children in the stage of early childhood. Media strategies should be so diversified as to meet the needs of various segments of the society.