Remarks of the Representative of Rwanda
Ms. Bintou Keita
7 May 2005
‘Marking the First Lady’s Initiative to Support Girls’ Education’

Background note
The Office of the First Lady (PACFA), with assistance from UNICEF, initiated a sensitization campaign in August 2004 aimed at promoting girls’ education in Rwanda. In addition to a nationwide sensitization campaign, awards for excellence were given to the best-performing girls from each district and province. The cultural event brought together female role models who are active in the sensitization campaign with high-level decision makers in order to discuss the challenges that girls face at all levels of education.

Dear Madame Jeannette Kagame, the First Lady; the Minister of State for Primary and Secondary Education; the children present, boys and girls; government officials; provincial and district officials; school authorities; development partners; ladies and gentlemen. It is an honor and great pleasure to be here today.

Last year, UNICEF had the privilege of working with the First Lady to launch a campaign for improved performance of girls in school, among other initiatives such as the prevention of HIV/AIDS. We are most grateful to the First Lady’s efforts in helping Rwanda meet the Millennium Development Goals, especially that of gender parity in enrolment. This year we reaped the results of that effort in the higher performance of girls.

The prize-giving ceremonies highlighted the challenges that girls face, but also the opportunities. It was a rallying effort in raising awareness at school levels, but also in getting others to take action. We take advantage of events like the present one to mobilize all accountable stakeholders to take action toward a defined result.

One of the most memorable events of 2004 was the partnership that emerged to address the huge challenge of accelerating girls’ education at all levels: central, provincial/district and school/community levels, and among children themselves. This is in line with the goals of the United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI), which has been launched by the UN Secretary General.

Acknowledgements go to the First Lady and the Ministry of Education, who convened the Girls’ Education Conference last year. The conference developed a network exemplified by the existence of a Taskforce for Girls’ Education, led by the Ministry of Education. Development partners and civil society organizations subscribed to the partnership. Communities and schools can now benefit from the partnership to ensure effective action at their level.

The Girls’ Action Plan particularly deserves our full support. It specifies action at all levels. We would like to see civil society organizations rally around this Plan of Action to
ensure nationwide implementation. We note that the cultural event has attracted a wide cross-section of prominent organizations. I take this opportunity to encourage you to join hands and efforts with the Ministry of Education and the First Lady in this campaign.

There are a few straightforward messages we send out over again and again which make a difference. For the government, life skills must be addressed in curricula and teachers must review their teaching methods to reduce discrimination against girls. Schools should protect girls against physical and sexual abuse while establishing gender-sensitive facilities such as latrines.

We have noted with appreciation the growing involvement of children in these efforts to get more girls to school. As you all know, child participation is a right. Indeed, participation is not only a right but also an effective means to obtain impact. While it empowers children through the development of leadership and other life skills, participation also enables children to reach out to others and touch the hearts of adults through unique communication strategies such as plays, sports, songs and poems. The children’s summit of 2004 illustrated this strongly. I therefore wish to encourage the development of the planned Girls’ Education Alliance, in which children and youth have mobilized themselves to effect action on girls’ education at all levels.

However, children cannot achieve results without adults. Alliances between children and adults help ensure collaboration among different young people’s associations to accelerate action. We just need to continue building the confidence of children, especially girls, and ensure their voices are heard – for example by promoting initiatives such as the FAWE ‘Tuseme clubs,’ which help empower girls. In their words of appreciation for the efforts of the First Lady today and their ability to tell us the way forward, children provide testimony to the power of child participation.

We laud these achievements without being forgetful of the remaining challenges. Gender parity at enrolment deserves acknowledgement insofar as the statistics are genuine. Nevertheless, girls’ passing and completion rates constitute the biggest challenge and justify the importance of continuing the First Lady’s campaign.

UNICEF is appreciative of its collaboration with PACFA for the girls’ education promotion campaign in August 2004. Apart from the sensitization campaign, the best-performing girls in P6 exams from each district were awarded an excellence prize. The best-performing girl in Lower Secondary (Tronc Commun) from each province was rewarded as well. The present cultural event brings together women role models who participated in the sensitization campaign and high-level decision makers. It offers an opportunity to present the barriers and issues girls face at all levels. Each and every one of us needs to regularly assess whether girls are acquiring reading, writing, numeracy and life skills. As the Government pushes for a policy on science and technology, we have to push for girls to participate by lifting the stereotypes against them. We have to ensure that the environment is safe and protective. In order to reach gender parity and end gender discrimination, we have to make sure that gender mainstreaming in all policies and strategies of the Government of Rwanda is a reality.
A particular challenge that I need to emphasize more specifically is the issue of gender-based violence. I will quote His Excellency President Paul Kagame during Women’s Day on 8 March 2005 as an illustration of the unfinished agenda: “I feel the work of fighting defilement, rape and other forms of women abuse have not been satisfactorily carried out.” It is a silent tragedy that happens daily in schools and communities – which is often not talked about to avoid tarnishing the image in the community. We still see girls becoming mothers at an early age and their schooling opportunities destroyed forever. This is unacceptable. We have to reinforce and enforce laws that condemn gender-based violence. Children expressed these issues during the girls’ education conference last year as being widespread and a clear threat to their participation in school. Therefore we commend the spirit of the nine-year basic education strategy which, if accompanied by a protective environment, would enable girls to gain control over their lives and prevent early pregnancies.

I wish to note that this is indeed an opportune time for the First Lady to launch another round of campaigns. It is a time which marks the end of the first target of the Millennium Declaration to ensure girls enrol equally with boys. The second phase aims at ensuring gender equity and equality by 2015. This second phase of the MDG is indeed a more complex process which looks at not only equity in enrollment but empowerment of girls and women in all aspects of life.

I therefore wish to commend the First Lady and Government for firing the first shot. I specifically wish to commend the fact that we have among us invited civil society groups that can implement and scale up best practices. We also count on the private sector to support positive action towards the fulfillment of this noble objective. Education managers here present will review existing processes to eliminate barriers which prevent girls from school retention and performance. We are fortunate to have children who have the potential to develop positive attitudes that will, if well-nurtured by educators from all walks of life, eradicate discrimination forever.

I may then conclude on a strong, optimistic note, that this cultural event will not turn out to be just a social event but an opportunity to make a difference in providing girls with an environment conducive to improving their welfare, access, participation, autonomy and control. We are all accountable for the achievement of this as a right to which we are dutybearers. We have to invest more efforts to ensure that girls have equal opportunities with boys in our society. No child should be denied the right to education as an engine of development.

Thank you very much (Murakoze Cyane)