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For Information:

Abubakar Dungus, +1 646-226-6120

Omar Gharzeddine, +1 212-297-5028

Micol Zarb, +1 212-297-5042

Patricia Leidl, +1 917-535-9508

World Must Not Allow Gender Apartheid to Wreck Efforts to Make Poverty History

New Report Calls for World Leaders to End Discrimination and Live Up to Promises Made to World's Women and Girls

LONDON/NEW YORK, 12 October 2005—Global efforts to “make poverty history” will fail unless world leaders act now to end gender discrimination, according to *The State of World Population 2005* report, released today by UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund.

The report, *The Promise of Equality: Gender Equity, Reproductive Health and the Millennium Development Goals*, calls upon world leaders to fulfill promises made to the world's women and young people in order to meet poverty reduction goals agreed to at the 2000 Millennium Summit and reaffirmed by last month's World Summit in New York. Investing in women and young people—who constitute the majority of the world's population—will accelerate long-term development. Failure to do so may entrench poverty for generations to come.

“I am here today to say that world leaders will not make poverty history until they make gender discrimination history”, said UNFPA Executive Director Thoraya Ahmed Obaid during the launch of the report today. “We cannot make poverty history until we stop violence against women and girls. We cannot make poverty history until women enjoy their full social, cultural, economic and political rights.”

The report—which coincides with the 60th anniversary of the United Nations Charter that enshrined the equal rights of women and men—says that investing in women and girls makes sound economic and social sense. This is because discrimination leads to lower productivity and higher health costs. It also results in higher death rates among mothers and children and significantly threatens efforts to reduce poverty around the world.

Worldwide, reproductive health problems—including HIV/AIDS—constitute the leading cause of death and illness among women between the ages of 15 and 44. Indeed, more than 250 million years of productive life are lost worldwide as a result.

Every year, about 529,000 women die of pregnancy-related causes that are almost entirely preventable. Lack of access to modern contraceptives is the major factor behind an estimated 76 million unintended pregnancies in the developing world alone, and an estimated 19 million unsafe abortions worldwide each year. Many of these lead to permanent disabilities or death.

Investing in political, economic and educational opportunities for women and girls, on the other hand, yields quick wins and high pay-offs that lead to improved economic prospects, smaller families, healthier and more literate children, lower HIV prevalence rates and reduced incidence

of harmful traditional practices. Furthermore, studies show that when women control the family purse strings, they are more likely than men to invest a higher percentage of their earnings in family needs.

Nevertheless, despite new laws and programmes to improve the condition of the world's most impoverished women, the pace of change is far too slow. While many countries are working to close gender gaps in education and improve health-care access for women, adolescents and other marginalized populations, statistics continue to tell a troubling tale.

Intimately associated with poverty is lack of access to family planning and reproductive health. Today, world population stands at almost 6.5 billion and is expected to reach 9.1 billion in 2050. This projection is predicated on whether men and women will continue to have the means to decide when and how often to have children.

Violence—perhaps the most systematic and pervasive of human rights abuses—continues to terrorize millions of women and girls regardless of geography, race or socio-economic status, says the report. Worldwide, 1 in 3 women is likely to experience physical, sexual or other abuses during her lifetime—usually by a family member or acquaintance. Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable, with nearly 50 per cent of sexual assaults worldwide involving girls aged 15 years and younger. In far too many cases, survivors are offered little in the way of recourse, justice or help.

Globally, women hold only 16 per cent of parliamentary seats—an increase of only 4 per cent since 1990. Some of the greatest strides are being made in developing countries. Rwanda, for example, has now surpassed Sweden with the highest proportion of women holding parliamentary seats in the world.

“Many leaders call for free trade to spur economic growth,” said Ms. Obaid. “It is time to call for action to *free women* of the discrimination, violence and poor health they face in their daily lives.”

“And I can assure you that women all over the world are tired of promises, promises, promises,” she added. “The time has come; we have the means, we have the commitment. Now we need action.”

UNFPA is an international development agency that promotes the right of every woman, man and child to enjoy a life of health and equal opportunity. UNFPA supports countries in using population data for policies and programmes to reduce poverty and to ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, every young person is free of HIV/AIDS, and every girl and woman is treated with dignity and respect.

UNFPA's *State of World Population* report has been published annually since 1978. Each year, the report focuses on questions of current interest and concern for the future. The report is available in Arabic, English, French, Russian and Spanish, at www.unfpa.org.