



Statement

by

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for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries
and Small Island Developing States**

**Dinner Meeting
to Commemorate the 54th Session
of the
Commission on the Status of Women**

**“The work of OHRLLS in relation to the MDG #3: promote gender
equality and empower women”**

**Tuesday, 2 March 2010, 6:30 – 8:30 p.m.
Private Dining Room 1, 2, 3 (1st Floor) UN HQ
New York**

**Sponsor:
Women’s Federation for World Peace International (WFWPI)**

Distinguished Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to begin by expressing my deep appreciation to the Women's Federation for World Peace for organizing this important event to commemorate the 54th CSW, Beijing +15. It is my great pleasure and honor to be invited to speak on the work of the United Nations Office for Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States in relation to Millennium Development Goal 3, which centers on the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women.

I sincerely hope that my intervention today will give greater momentum to the broader challenge of gender parity as we edge closer to 2015.

Ladies and Gentleman,

Many decades of advocacy by women's organizations and networks such as the Women's Federation for World Peace has resulted in the global recognition of contributions that women make to the political, economic, social and intellectual development of society. The success of those efforts is evident not only in the promises that countries have made over the past two decades through international fora, but also through the concrete steps that have been taken by countries to ensure fairness between men and women.

Distinguished participants,

It has become increasingly clear that gender equality is not only a goal in its own right, but also an important means for realizing all the other Millennium Development Goals. In fact, achieving the MDGs will be impossible without closing the gaps between women and men.

The basic target of the third goal is to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015.

A brief look at the statistics shows that in 2007, only 53 of the 171 countries with available data had achieved gender parity in both primary and secondary education - that is 14 more countries than in 1999. Indeed, this signals progress. Still, the fact that over 100 countries have yet to reach the target is a source of concern.

Undoubtedly, cultural attitudes and practices that promote early marriage or attach greater value to educating boys rather than girls can create formidable barriers to gender parity. Yet it has been shown that targeted public policy and governance initiatives can help overcome gender inequalities.

A number of interventions that have proven effective for increasing girl's participation in primary school may also apply to post-primary education. These include making schooling more affordable by reducing costs and offering targeted scholarships, building secondary schools close to girls' homes, and making schools girl-friendly.

Additionally, the content, quality, and relevance of education must be improved through curriculum reform, teacher training, and other actions.

Education must serve as the vehicle for transforming attitudes, beliefs, and entrenched social norms that perpetuate discrimination and inequality. All interventions taken to promote gender equality in education must, therefore, be transformational in nature.

At this juncture, I would like to mention that my Office has embarked on a fund raising effort to kick-start a pilot scholarship programme which centers on the Millennium Development Goals. The fellowship specifically targets talented individuals from poor and vulnerable countries to undertake tertiary training abroad. It is my personal commitment to ensure that at least 50 per cent of these scholarships go to young women from impoverished backgrounds.

I am of the firm opinion that an investment in quality secondary and tertiary schooling is indeed a guarantee towards accelerating progress towards several of the Millennium Development Goals, especially MDG Goal 3.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The issue of sexual and reproductive rights for girls and women is at the heart of MDG 3.

A large body of evidence shows that sexual and reproductive health rights are central to women's ability to take advantage of economic and political opportunities, and thus control their destinies. Conversely, gender inequality that restricts women's access to economic resources compromises their sexual and reproductive autonomy.

Maternal mortality rates are high, particularly in developing countries where a woman's chance of dying from pregnancy-related complications are almost 50 times greater than in developed countries. Interventions to improve reproductive health must therefore be a priority and should occur both within and outside the health system. At a minimum, national public health systems must provide quality family planning services.

Outside the health system, sexuality education programmes are needed to lay the foundation for improved sexual and reproductive health outcomes. Ultimately, these interventions must be supported by an enabling policy and political environment that guarantees women and girls sexual and reproductive rights.

Although in its early stage, our Office is currently in talks with IMEC, a US- based health care NGO to initiate a pilot programme that will see the delivery of improved maternal care in several least developed countries. It is an ambitious project, but one worth exploring if we are going to make a real difference in improving reproductive health in the poorest countries.

Distinguished Participants,

Allow me to shift my focus to the subject of employment. Paid work for women continues to expand slowly and remains meagre in many regions. Globally, the share of women in paid employment outside the agricultural sector has continued to increase marginally over the years. But in the least developed countries, most of which are in Africa, employment opportunities for women remain extremely low.

Although more and more women have been able to secure paid jobs outside agriculture, they have generally failed to access decent work. Close to two thirds of all employed women have vulnerable jobs.

Needless to say the global financial crisis is creating new hurdles to women's employment. The International Labour Organisation highlighted that the global unemployment rate in 2009 reached 7.1 percent, with a corresponding unemployment rate for women ranging from 6.5 to 7.4 percent (compared to 6.1 to 7 percent for men).

Simply put: although men were hit hardest by the financial shock, women may be more profoundly affected over the long term. The number of unemployed men increased at a faster rate than the number of unemployed

women, especially during the second half of 2008. However, more recent data show that women's unemployment is likely to continue increasing at a rapid pace, while the rate of increase of men's unemployment is slowing.

While opportunities for paid employment for women have increased in countries around the world, the nature, terms, and quality of women's employment have not improved commensurately. Having access to paid work is critical to family survival, but it is not sufficient for reducing poverty or empowering women. Decent, productive work for all should be the goal.

Distinguished Participants,

In 1995 governments and the United Nations agreed to promote "[gender mainstreaming](#)" in policies and programs. The Beijing Platform of Action recommended that governments set a target of 30 percent for women in national parliaments.

Data shows that women's political representation is slowly growing. Women hold 30 per cent or more of single or lower chamber seats in 24 countries and 30 per cent or more of upper chamber seats in 15 countries.

Sub-Saharan Africa continues to make strides, with Rwanda out in front: it made history in September 2008 when its lower chamber elected a majority (56 per cent) of women members. In Liberia, President Sirleaf has been commended on steering her country towards greater stability.

Because gender inequality is deeply rooted in entrenched attitudes, societal institutions, and market forces, political commitment at the highest international and national levels is essential to instituting the policies that can trigger social change.

Some of you may be aware that my Office is currently undertaking preparations for the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, which will take place in Turkey in 2011. Key to this meeting is a review of the Brussels Programme of Action for LDCs. During this process my Office has called on national governments to closely reflect on the degree to which the Programme of Action has addressed the needs of their citizens, and in particular women.

Allow me to underscore that each of the seven commitments outlined in the Brussels Programme of Action calls on governments in the LDCs to pay special attention to the plight of women. For example, Commitment 1 encourages LDCs to support initiatives that help empower women living in poverty. Under the broader umbrella of building productive capacities in the LDCs, Commitment 4 makes explicit that poor women should have increased access to support services and productive resources. Much of our advocacy efforts attempts to hold these Member States accountable to these commitments, especially with regards to how they are applied to women.

In just a few days in Addis Ababa, African NGOs will gather to share with each other to share their experiences of the Brussels Programme of Action as part of the lead-up to the global UN Conference. More than half of the participants expected to attend are female grassroots activists from across the African continent.

It is my belief that women ought to take their rightful place at the table. Here at the United Nations, as you know, the General Assembly has agreed to create a powerful and dynamic new gender equality entity for women's empowerment.

Where now we have four women-specific entities, soon we will have one that is better resourced, with a stronger field presence. We have more women USGs than at any time in UN history – and many of them are the

first women appointees to positions which have traditionally been held by men over the past six decades. This was recently reinforced with the appointment of Margot Wallström of Sweden as his Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict and the launching of the multi-year UNiTE to End Violence against Women campaign aimed at preventing and eliminating violence against women and girls in all parts of the world.

Personally, the majority of my staff is female, including the Director. Indeed, our efforts to reach the MDGs must place women at the centre of decision-making.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I bring my statement to a close, I would like to touch on two additional issues, which I feel deserves greater attention.

The first is female property and inheritance rights, which I believe is a key step towards empowering women both economically and socially. Rectifying this injustice will also have other positive outcomes because women's lack of property has been increasingly linked to development-related problems, including poverty, HIV/AIDS, and violence. In addition to welfare gains, gender-equal land rights can enhance productive efficiency. Land title can serve as collateral, improving women's access to credit, which in turn can increase output.

Another avenue for increasing income for poor women is through micro-enterprise development. Microfinance programmes have been a popular economic strategy over the past two decades to assist poor and landless women to enter self-employment or start their own business. More attention also needs to be given to innovative savings and insurance instruments for low income women.

Finally, I should say that your engagement with this issue is encouraging. When I am in the presence of this kind of energy, it seems to me there is nothing we cannot do.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

For all the serious threats we face today, this is also a time when transformational change is possible – big change on the big issues of our age. And one of the biggest issues is achieving equality between women and men.

Thank you.