

Commission on the Status of Women

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Introductory Statement

by

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Madame Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Representatives of UN entities and of non-governmental organizations,
Colleagues and friends,

It is my great pleasure to extend a warm welcome to the distinguished members of the Commission and the many observers and representatives of the NGO community from all parts of the globe. Your presence here today is a reaffirmation of continued relevance of the work of this Commission for gender equality. I would like to pay special tribute to sister United Nations organizations for their support.

Allow me to congratulate you, Madam Chairperson, and the members of the Bureau and commend you on your leadership and your skills in guiding our deliberations and thank you for your excellent work on engendering the Summit Outcome. Throughout this process, your proven record of leadership, as well as your diplomatic experience have ensured steady progress.

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Commission, I would like to start by recalling that the Commission was created in 1946 by ECOSOC when the post-World War II world was in the throes of its most radical change aimed at saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war, reaffirming faith in fundamental human rights and equal rights of men and women, and promoting social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom. This new world called on this Commission at its first session held in February 1947, not only “to raise the status of women, irrespective of nationality, race, language or religion” but also to ensure that women could play an equal role “in the building of a free, healthy, prosperous and moral society.”

We have come a long way since then. During the past 60 years women of the world have made remarkable gains. These gains would be impossible without the tireless efforts and leadership of this Commission. Joining forces with governments, the dynamic world women’s movement and international organizations, the Commission worked hard

to bring women's advancement and empowerment to the centre of the United Nations quest for peace, development and human rights. Today, gender equality is at the heart of the mission of this Organization.

It is therefore not surprising that in September 2005, in the face of multiple threats of our globalized environment - extreme poverty, environmental degradation, deadly pandemics, terrorism, organized crime, the risk of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction - the World Summit brought Heads of State and Government together in reaffirming their commitment to the full and effective implementation of the goals and objectives of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, as an essential contribution to achieving the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium De

programmes mainstream gender, requesting compulsory portions of budget allocations to gender equality, establishing related trust funds at national levels and using gender markers by donors to help track gender related expenditures.

Second, the Summit also stressed the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peacebuilding. Currently, women's role in peacebuilding remains marginal. In September 2005, I travelled to the Sudan to meet with Sudanese authorities and women in both Darfur and in the South. Despite an active presence of women in Sudan's North-South Peace Negotiations that culminated in the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in January 2005, they are, however, altogether excluded from the Peace Negotiations on Darfur. The overall situation of Sudanese women continues to be dire as they shoulder the thrust of the post conflict problems (unabated violence, rapes, sexual slavery, abject poverty, lack of healthcare, three generations without schooling, scarcity of water and food, economic deprivation and social discrimination). I call the attention of this Commission to their plight.

Another country in transition from conflict to peace is Afghanistan. The Secretary-General's report before you on the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan (E/CN.6/2006/5) reviews women's contributions to peacebuilding, social and economic reconstruction and rehabilitation in Afghanistan. Afghan women gained 27 per cent of seats in the Wolesi Jirga (House of the People). In addition to women's political participation, there has also been improvements in access to education, reductions in maternal mortality, and greater awareness of gender equality within the government and efforts to combat violence. Yet, Afghan women's human security conditions remain extremely poor; poverty, illiteracy and persistent discrimination against women in the social and economic realms are hindering progress in women's empowerment.

In this regard, two reform processes agreed by the Summit and now under way, can be strategic entry points for gender perspectives: reform of the Security Council and the creation of the Peacebuilding Commission with its Support Office and Fund. A more broadly representative Security Council, better reflecting the geopolitical realities of today, would be more authoritative and, therefore, more effective in protecting women's rights and enhancing their role in peace processes. Also the creation of a new intergovernmental Peacebuilding Commission has the potential of playing a critical role in enhancing women's participation in post-conflict development. This Office, in cooperation with gender focal points and civil society, actively works with the Office of the Secretary-General to engender the work of the Commission and its Support Office.

Third, also in the realm of women and peace, the Summit reaffirmed its commitment to the full and effective implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security. In this connection, a system-wide action plan, mandated by the Security Council for implementing resolution 1325 (2000), which comprised inputs of 37 entities of the United Nations system, with a view to strengthening commitment and accountability at the highest levels (S/PRST/2005/52), was endorsed by the Council. However, tangible results require action by Member

States. I urge you to intensify your efforts at the national level to implement this resolution, including through national action plans.

Fourth, the Summit decided to replace the Commission on Human Rights with a smaller, more focused Human Rights Council. Given the centrality of women's human rights to the mission of the Organization, and indeed the very identification of the United Nations with the cause of human rights, including women's rights, we have high expectations for the Council. It would meet throughout the year, be better able to respond to emergencies, including mass violations of women's rights, and have a mandate to look at human rights conditions in all countries. In addition to the work of the Council, the strengthening of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights with a dedicated Section on Women's Rights will enhance United Nations capacity to monitor and report on women's rights violations. Together with the Division for the Advancement of Women, we are working closely with the High Commissioner and the Committee on Elimination of Discrimination against Women to give women's rights the central place they deserve in the new institutional human rights structure and fully integrate them in the work of the Council. We look forward to your support for these efforts.

Fifth, violence against women, as a persisting violation of women's human rights that affects women in all countries, in all situations, particularly in post-disaster and post-conflict areas, was one of the issues that received significant attention in the Summit Outcome. The Secretary-General's study on violence against women, requested by the General Assembly in December 2003 and being prepared by our Division for the Advancement of Women, is expected to support the Commission in its ongoing efforts to address violence against women. The study will be submitted to the sixty-first session. I urge you to strengthen or enact legislation, including provisions for the prosecution of perpetrators; incorporate the issue of violence against women in national action plans for promotion of gender equality and undertake awareness-raising and information dissemination campaigns.

Violence against women is also one of the issues highlighted in the recent publication of *The World's Women 2005*, prepared by the United Nations Statistics Division. A comprehensive report on sexual exploitation and abuse by United Nations peacekeeping personnel, prepared by the Secretary-General's Adviser on this issue, Prince Zeid Ra'ad Zeid Al-Husseini, provided bold recommendations for action by the Secretariat as well as Member States. The recommendations form the basis of a Draft Policy on the Assistance to Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse which is being finalized.

Sixth, the Summit called for "increased representation of women in Government decision-making bodies, including through ensuring their equal opportunity to participate fully in the political process." In recent elections and re-elections in Chile, Finland, Germany, Latvia and Liberia to the highest positions in Government (and we hope to add Jamaica to the list shortly), women leaders made a quantum leap by increasing their representation by more than 30 per cent from 8 to 11. According to available data, in

January 2006 in 20 States, representation of women was over 30 per cent. Women in the world's Parliaments account for 16.3 per cent. Whilst numbers of women at cabinet level have been growing in some countries and three countries – Chile, Spain and Sweden - have reached gender equality in government; worldwide, women account for only 14 per cent of ministers.

Although signs of progress are visible in all countries, in most countries women continue to be woefully underrepresented. Research shows that proportional representation, quotas, and other measures have been invaluable tools for women to move ahead numerically and bring forward the agenda of women's political participation. Those are lessons Member States may wish to take on board to increase women's role in decision-making.

Seventh, the world leaders undertook to actively promote the mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and social spheres. In a major breakthrough, the Summit Outcome has not only recognized the importance of gender mainstreaming as a tool for achieving gender equality but also encouraged the Secretary-General and all decision-making bodies to take further steps in mainstreaming a gender perspective in the policies and decisions of the Organization.

In responding to these decisions, the Secretary-General called upon all United Nations entities to develop action plans and tasked the High-Level Committees of the Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB)

implementation and determined action, as we seek to address the identified gaps and challenges and fulfil our commitments to gender equality.

Like the founders of this Commission, in times of change, we must be pragmatic yet visionary. Working together, seizing opportunities presented by the Summit Outcome, and the reforms underway, we can turn into a formidable force for gender

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