

**Statement by Kavita Ramdas, CEO & President of the Global Fund for Women
Expert Respondent on Friday, September 10, 2004**

Good Afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am pleased and honored to appear before you in this session as a respondent, along with other conference participants, to the 57th Annual DPI NGO Conference on the Millennium Development Goals. Today it seems essential to speak of a narrative that goes largely unheard in the conversations about implementing the Millennium Goals that take place in halls such as this one.

Through participating in forums convened by the United Nations, women have added their voices to calls for a more just world. Women have influenced resolutions and won crucial commitments to set a far-reaching global policy agenda that recognizes gender equality and women's empowerment as essential components of poverty eradication, human development, and human rights. Indeed, UN forums have become critical spaces for women to join together in imagining, strategizing, and documenting plans to create a better world.

If there was a turning point moment in which collectively, women's contribution to imagining a better world rose to a new sophistication and effectiveness, it was in 1995, in Beijing. There, in unprecedented streams from around the globe, thousands of women and supporters came together to share accomplishments, strategies, and goals. And it was there that the Beijing Platform for Action was born. This document outlines key challenges and offers comprehensive strategies for lessening poverty, increasing equality between men and women, and between races and nations; increasing access to education; ending violence and building a thriving civil society. To many women working for a better world, Beijing is remembered as much more than the city of Tiananmen Square, for in Beijing they not only envisioned a brighter future, they outlined a plan that would bring this world to life. New NGO's and leaders emerged as women more deeply

understood their role in eradication of the world's most pressing problems, and their unique ability to influence their families and communities.

The impact of the Beijing platform reverberated through the Millennium Summit in New York City in September 2000. There, 191 countries pledged, as part of their efforts to create a better world, "to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable." The Declaration validates "the equal rights and opportunities of women and men" and pledges "to combat all forms of violence against women and to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women." These pledges were made by some of the very same governments that invest more in arms than in education, and more in protecting the status quo than in challenging antiquated laws that permit the domination and harm of women. Still, the sense of possibility for a new world articulated in Beijing was present.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDG's), by contrast, which are called a Road Map of the Millennium Declaration, do not match the spirit of the Declaration, and depart even further from the Beijing Platform. The MDG's do address several of the 12 Critical Areas of Concern in the Platform for Action adopted in Beijing, namely poverty (1), education (2), health (5) and environmental sustainability (7). Yet, they ignore the extraordinary contributions and practical strategies created and presented by women's organizations and activists in Beijing. The over arching goal of gender equality is reduced to a single and narrowly defined objective, measured by improved enrollment and retention of girls so as to equalize the participation of girls and boys in primary education. Furthermore, the MDG's say nothing of peace building, even as the devastation wrought by war and conflict the world over stymie hopes for any form of real and sustainable development. The MDG's reflect a form of regression, a backward step that negates several decades of work by the global women's movement, wastes precious energy and power, and robs of us of time that we do not have.

For, how can we alleviate poverty without a deliberate strategy to improve the status of women? We know that the poorest of the poor are women. How can we expect children and families to achieve economic viability if the inequality of the primary stewards of family and society are not addressed? We know that in war and post-conflict, women suffer disproportionately – they are the majority of those displaced, and their bodies are the ones raped and mutilated as armies and militias inflict terror. As we seek to address the world’s most urgent challenges, how can we afford to ignore fully one half of humanity by erasing the spirit, imagination, and energy present in Beijing?

The women of the world cannot allow this to happen. The United Nations is one of the few remaining institutions of global governance left to us in an increasingly unilateral world. Women must be able to bring their collective voice and years of invaluable expertise to the tables of international negotiation and the debates about development. Their efforts to make good on the ground-breaking platforms for action in Cairo in 1994 and Beijing in 1995 can and must breathe new life and a reaffirmation to gender justice into the new goals for the 21st century. At the Global Fund for Women, we know that thousands of our grantees will continue their work to end violence, build peace, educate girls and boys equally, and counter religious extremism whether the world’s donors and multi-lateral aid agencies incorporate and support their vision or not. The infrastructure of a truly global women’s movement helped to create in Beijing proposals for concrete strategies and real action for achieving what Susan B. Anthony once dreamed of when she said:

"The day will come when men will recognize woman as his peer, not only at the fireside, but in councils of the nation. Then, and not until then, will there be the perfect comradeship, the ideal union between the sexes that shall result in the highest development of the human race."

-Susan B. Anthony (1820-1903)

Women activists worldwide know that the Beijing Platform for Action can still be incorporated in the Millennium Development Goals. Earlier this year, at a conference in, yes, Beijing, the Secretary General reported that progress toward the MDG's was "uneven at best." Perhaps if we incorporate the imagination and strategies of an earlier conference, his next report will give us all cause for hope.