The preparatory meeting for the ECOSOC 2005 High-level Segments
16-17 March 2005

**Roundtable 5: Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women**
Strengthening institutions to deliver on commitments to gender equality and women's
empowerment

**Chair: H.E. Mr. Jaime Moncayo Garcia** (Ecuador), Vice-President of ECOSOC

**Moderator: Noeleen Heyzer (**Executive Director UNIFEM)

**Participants:**
**Ambassador Johan Ludvik Løvald** (Norway)
**Ms. Charlotte Bunch** (Center for Women's Global Leadership)
**Ms. Aruna Rao** (Gender at Work)
**Ms. Caroline Moser** (Brookings Institution)
**Mr. Ndolamb Ngokwey** (UNICEF)

**Discussants** included representatives from The African Union, The FAO, Canada and the
United Kingdom

**Introduction**
UNIFEM convened a roundtable discussion on 17 March in collaboration with DESA,
UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNESCO and the Millennium Project, on gender
equality and the empowerment of women. The meeting focused on achieving the
internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the Millennium
Declaration, as well as implementing the outcomes of the major UN Conferences and
Summits. The panel explored how institutions are responding – or failing to respond – to
forward agreed commitments. It presented views on the structures of institutions that
perpetuate gender discrimination and provided examples of how changes are beginning to
emerge. The panel described how multi-stakeholder partnerships, broad-based
participation, and support for gender equality goals within the broader public can
contribute to sustained transformation toward gender equality, identifying promising
practices as well as institutional blockages. The discussion highlighted recommendations
from The Millennium Project's Task Force 3, 2005 report *Taking Action: Achieving
Gender Equality and Empowering Women*.

The moderator posed a number of questions to the panel:
- How can institutions become more accountable to gender equality and women's
  empowerment in the context of the Millennium Declaration?
- What are the characteristics of an institution that is accountable to gender
  equality?
- What are the enabling factors that transform institutions to become accountable to
  gender equality and women's rights and what are the blockages?
- How can we stimulate greater progress in supporting institutions to become
  accountable to gender equality?

Key elements and messages from the discussion included the following:

**Centrality of gender equality**
Gender equality is central to the upcoming Millennium Summit + 5 as is the need for the Beijing PfA and CEDAW to inform the Summit and the MDGs. The panel noted that the Seven Strategic Priorities of Task Force 3 for achieving gender equality are the *minimum* requirements to reinforce all of the MDGs. The FAO emphasized the centrality of women's education in relation to issues of nutrition, and hence to overall poverty reduction. Civil society was encouraged to lobby representatives at the ECOSOC hearings (23 – 24 June 2005).

**Create specific MDGs on reproductive health and violence against women**
The absence of reproductive rights and violence against women (VAW) from the MDGs and VAW from the report of the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change was noted. It was suggested that specific targets or indicators on reproductive health and rights, and one on violence against women be established.

**Return to a Human Rights basis**
In general, gender-responsive institutions are more likely to be found and succeed in contexts that have an overall commitment to equity and justice. Transformatory goals live uneasily in large development agencies and in an increasingly conservative fiscal and policy environment organizations will tend to concentrate on what they believe is their core business tracked by concrete results. The focus within the MDGs has shifted from gender equality and women's empowerment to poverty reduction. There is much less focus on rights, security and ending violence, thereby requiring the strengthened capacity of women to claim their rights through communication and protection from intimidation, along with the need for a return of the human rights commitments set forth in the World Conferences of the 1990's as a basis for the MDGs.

**Work for long-term change**
It is important to work over the long term for systematic change to address gender equality. The results-oriented emphasis on "quick wins" in the MDGs can have a negative impact on work toward gender equality. The household is a key institution for observing such long-term progress, such as in Ecuador where levels of education for girls have risen dramatically from the previous generation and girls are increasingly empowered to claim their rights.

**Strengthen resources and implement agreed commitments**
Despite an improvement in the rhetoric and increased awareness of gender equality, implementation and resource gaps remain. Goodwill and declarations of good intentions are not sufficient to ensure women's empowerment. Indicators of questionable levels of commitment at the 49th session of the CSW were government-agreed resolutions which consistently noted that 'no new resources would be required'. The implementation gap is related to the capacity gap, exemplified by relative lack of human resources and the weakness of gender focal points in mainstream institutions.

**Increase women's representation**

The weakness of women's presence in governance and within development institutions was noted as one cause of the failure, thus far, to implement commitments to gender equality. For example, too little progress has been made to achieve the commitment of 30% female representation in Parliaments. Women's representation is essential to advancing development, hence panelists advocated for a boost in women's representation in governance, within the architecture of institutions and through gender experts with requisite standing to influence decisions.

**Systematize and strengthen gender equality mechanisms within existing institutions**

Within institutional structures, the advancement of gender equality is constrained when it is one of many competing agendas, lacks a critical mass of change-agents and is caught up in the confusion over gender mainstreaming. A positive example of change within women's organizations in Colombia demonstrated the need for a clear set of priorities for gender equality advocates. The formerly splintered groups honed their numerous competing agendas to a coherent and agreed set of messages in order to influence the peace process.

Within the United Nations system, field experiences of engendering CCA/UNDAFs, PRSPs, and NEPAD, demonstrated that regional inter-agency cooperation was an important mechanism for enhancing action on gender equality within institutions and processes. The TCPR is another positive roadmap for the future, with clear points highlighted for ways of strengthening the UNCTs work on gender equality.

**Eliminate institutional blockage**

Institutions were defined as formal and informal rules that determine who does what, who gets what, what counts, and who decides. Formal organizations, because they are embedded in social contexts, tend to reflect and reproduce existing power imbalances. So while their formal rules may specify non-discrimination in serving a population, they often operate according to rules and values that may be hidden – which *do* discriminate against women and the poor. It is necessary to disaggregate institutional activities and shift mandates in ways that allow us to understand what they do well and to hold them accountable for those outcomes. Four strategies for making organizations more responsive to women's interests: 1) Allow political access by constituents, with substantial gender expertise in place; 2) Track progress toward positive social change rather than through discrete countable measures that are poorly connected to women's empowerment; 3) Create an institutional culture that does not perpetuate power imbalances and the public-private divides in society (e.g. women's unpaid labor as a subsidy to support men's public participation); 4) Examine how the work is conceived and whom it serves through gender-sensitive norms and understandings of rights, economics, and governance.