

## **REMARKS BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF UNOG TO EVENT COMMEMORATING INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2009**

Following are the opening remarks delivered by Sergei Ordzhonikidze, Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, at an event held at the Palais des Nations today commemorating International Women's Day 2009. The theme of the commemoration event was "The Economics of the Financial Crisis: Gender Equality and the Role of Women":

"It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the Palais des Nations to celebrate International Women's Day 2009. Allow me, first of all, to extend a warm welcome to our eminent speakers and panellists. They represent our Member States, many parts of the United Nations system and civil society partners. Their participation today shows that empowering women and advancing towards gender equality is very much a collective task that can only be realized through a firm partnership among all stakeholders. I should also like to thank our co-hosts, the Geneva Committee on the Status of Women of the Conference of NGOs in consultative relationship with the United Nations. Since its establishment, the Committee, through advocacy and by holding Governments to their promises, has not only made a practical difference to the lives of women around the world. It has given a voice to those who cannot speak up for themselves. You serve as role models and as an illustration of what can be accomplished through the inclusion of women. We can all be inspired by your activism and your achievements, and it is a pleasure to be holding this event with you.

The empowerment of women is not only a fundamental objective in its own right. It is essential to addressing the range of complex challenges before us – from instability and conflict, poverty and hunger, to environmental degradation and climate change. Gender equality is at once a key Millennium Development Goal – and a prerequisite for achieving all the Goals together.

The United Nations has, over the years, played a central role in setting strategies for gender equality, generating commitments from all stakeholders. I know that my colleagues from the United Nations system will speak of these efforts in a few minutes. The Secretary-General has given particular emphasis, during the past twelve months, to ending violence against women and girls, which has helped to raise the visibility of this major obstacle to women's empowerment.

We have a long way to go yet. Despite impressive gains in achieving parity in primary school education, girls still account for over 55% of children not in school. Improving maternal health is key to development and to better public health. Yet, among all the Millennium Goals, this is where we have made the least progress. Every year, more than half a million mothers around the world die during pregnancy, childbirth or within six weeks of delivery.

Women continue to be under-represented in political decision-making at all levels. While they are slowly gaining a greater share of parliamentary seats, this progress remains erratic and marked by regional differences. And women are largely absent from the highest levels of governance. We need greater involvement of women in the area of peace and security – from conflict prevention, too peace negotiations, peacekeeping and peacebuilding. As Secretary-General of the Conference on Disarmament, I would also like to encourage more women to engage more directly in promotion of disarmament.

Job opportunities have opened up for women in many sectors, but many are trapped in low-income, insecure employment. They are disproportionately represented in seasonal and short-term informal jobs that are poorly paid and unsafe, and are deprived of benefits. As the Secretary-General has repeatedly warned, the current economic and financial crisis is likely to have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable – on the "bottom billion". Given the considerable proportion of women in precarious job situations, they are likely to be among the hardest hit through higher unemployment, lower social benefits and decreased remittances. This would compound existing inequalities.

We must work together, therefore, to ensure that the crisis does not undo hard-won gains in reducing gender gaps in education, health and employment. The empowerment of women is not an objective to be pursued only when the economies of the world are strong. On the contrary, the inclusion of women, and of their talent and resources, has to be part of the solution to the current crisis. If we lose our focus on the empowerment of women, we miss one of the principal remedies. Indeed, we must turn this crisis into an opportunity for innovation and gender equality. In a climate of economic uncertainty, this is one investment we know will pay long-term dividends.

Women are powerful agents of change – when they are given the opportunity. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that they are given that opportunity. This requires not only adjusting policies and

practices, but most importantly, changing attitudes and habits. And here, each one of us must play a vital role.

I wish you all a productive International Women's Day celebration."