



Statement of the Commission on the Status of Women  
to the United Nations

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Statement

by

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to

the high-level plenary of the 49<sup>th</sup> session of  
the Commission on the Status of Women

on the

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women  
and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly  
entitled "Women 2000: gender, equality, development  
and peace for the twenty-first century"

New York, 1 March 2005

Madam Chairperson,  
Distinguished Delegates,  
Representatives of the United Nations agencies and the NGO community,

I take great honour in addressing this august Commission at this important milestone, and sharing my country's experiences in advancing the cause of Eritrean women.

Looking back to that historic conference in Beijing, one can only appreciate the important strides made in the last ten years. But, one also would not fail to notice the vast ground yet to be covered. I can only attest to this realisation from our own assessment of the situation in Eritrea.

Having established the most urgent priority areas relevant to our country, the government of Eritrea embarked on a wide range of policy reforms and programmes aimed at furthering gender equality and advancing women's interests.

Following its ratification by the government, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was widely promoted and disseminated in the country to raise public awareness about women's rights. As the national report on the implementation of CEDAW notes, "The strong commitment and political will of the government [has been crucial] to the implementation of the Convention. The Eritrean government has done a great deal to [secure] Eritrean women equal opportunities, particularly by adopting legislation to guarantee their equal status and enhance their role in society".

The fundamental guarantee of women's equal rights is enshrined in the Eritrean Constitution, ratified in 1997, which states, "Any act that violates the human rights of women or limits or otherwise thwarts their role and participation is prohibited."

Eritrean women also made their voices heard in the legal reform process that spanned the second half of the 1990s, resulting in a complete revamp of the Civil & Criminal Codes, which, among other improvements, repealed all prejudiced clauses.

Some of the key features of the reform include:

- Establishing the principle of free consent of both partners, man and woman, in marriage, thereby guaranteeing women's equal rights;
- Raising the legal age for marriage from 15 to 18 years;
- Prohibiting bride price;
- Providing legal protection to women's rights upon marriage, divorce and succession;
- Making more severe the punishment to rape offenders; and
- Securing the right of women to own and inherit land; a legal right also protected by Eritrea's Land Proclamation.

Other legal reform developments affecting the status of women include the Labour Law of 2001, which provides unprecedented legal protection for women workers.

Furthermore, the new regional election regulations, issued in 2004, reinforced previous provisions, under the Local Government Act of 1996, on expanding women's opportunities for holding elected office. These provisions include, but are not limited to, a minimum quota of 30% in all legislative bodies for women contenders.

Promoting women's participation in public life — encouraging and supporting them to run for elected offices, to get organized and seek meaningful representation in all branches of power — is not limited to legislation. Women's participation in the local & regional elections in 2002, the subsequent elections in 2003 of the newly instituted community courts, and the regional assemblies in 2004, was pursued vigorously as official public policy. As a result, the number of women elected as village administrators and deputies and in the regional assemblies has increased.

It is also noteworthy to mention that recently one of the six appointed Regional Administrators is a woman. Likewise, significant numbers of female candidates were elected in 2003 as community court magistrates in the first-ever elections of its kind in Eritrea. Nationwide, 410 women, comprising 19.98% of the total, were elected.

It is further encouraging to note that, in both elections, local and community court magistrates, many of the women candidates were elected by directly competing with the male candidates, i.e. without resorting to the quota system.

However, representation of women in the civil service, poses a challenge. Although women occupy about 40% of the civil service posts, only 8.1% are in key positions. It is an area where the government is making serious efforts to improve the representation of women in key positions of the civil service.

Mme. Chairperson,

Addressing gender disparity in education is a central theme of our government's policy. The country's net primary enrolment almost doubled in the period between 1991 and 2001, increasing from 24.8% to 46%. Yet, the ratio of girls to boys in the primary level did not improve over the same period. Hence, while the overall number of girls attending primary school has increased substantially from 69,000 to 146,000 over the decade, male enrolment rates have increased slightly faster.

The most noticeable disparity in enrolment is in the secondary level. Compared to an increase from 9.1% to 16.6% for male students over the same period, the female net enrolment rate increased only — from 9.1% to 11.8%. Gross Enrolment Rates (GER) grew from 13% to 30.1% for males, but only from 13.3% to 17.6% for females.

On the positive side, the female illiteracy rate among adults has dropped from 65% in 1990 to 55% in 2000. The ratio of young literate females to males (who are between 15-24 yrs) increased from 0.68 in 1990 to 0.76 in 2001.

Mme. Chairperson,

An important indicator of women's health and survival is the percentage of deliveries attended by skilled health personnel. According to the Eritrea Demographic & Health Survey (EDHS) of 2002, this rate increased from 21% to 28% between 1995 and 2001.

Antenatal coverage has increased from 49% to 71% over the same period. The EDHS in 2002 did not, for technical/methodological reasons, include an analysis of the maternal mortality rate, estimated at 998 per 100,000 live births in 1995. However, the increase in the rate of births attended by skilled health personnel, in addition to the overall improvement and expansion of primary health care delivery and the accompanying reduction in child mortality rates discussed above, are considered as proxy indicators for a possible reduction in maternal mortality.

Mme. Chairperson,

Though Eritrean women still remain disadvantaged in many economic fields, they have started gaining unprecedented access to economic resources. In an acute departure from previous practices, more and more women throughout the country are acquiring land for farming, residential and other purposes. In the six administrative regions of all land recipients between 1998 and 2003, about 26.6% were women. Women are also increasingly benefiting from the main micro-credit programmes in the country. Another indicator of women's economic empowerment is their ownership of business enterprises. Forty one percent of all business licenses issued in the Central Region over the period 1999-2003 were to women.

Mme. Chairperson,

Finding the right institutional set-up for an effective and relevant national gender mechanism was not easy. In Eritrea, we opted for an arrangement where, the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEWmn) is officially mandated to play this role, supported by a number of government institutions. Though not without its challenges, this institutional arrangement is working quite well mainly drawing on the flexibility and advocacy advantages that the Union's character as a national NGO permits.

Mme. Chairperson,

Pondering on the theme of our meeting - "Peace, Development and Equality", none is more urgent and profound than 'Peace' for the people of Eritrea, and those of our region.

Upon signing the Peace Agreement in Algiers on 12 December 2000, Eritrea and Ethiopia agreed to resort to international arbitration to resolve their border dispute. The agreement stipulated the establishment of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) under the auspices of the United Nations. The International Community, represented by the United Nations, the African Union, the European Union and the United States of America, witnessed the agreement by putting their signatures as guarantors. Explicit in the agreement was the consent of both parties (Eritrea and Ethiopia) to abide by the ruling of the EEBC as 'final and binding'.

The decision on border delimitation was announced by the EEBC in The Hague on 13 April 2002. Eritrea accepted the decision in its entirety and remains committed to its implementation. On the other hand, the Ethiopian Government, after initially declaring its enthusiastic acceptance, later started making pronouncements of reservation and finally, on 19 September 2003, declared its outright rejection of the 'final and binding' ruling of the Commission. And lately as a ploy for public relations consumption it has come with its so called "acceptance in principle" of the decision of the Border

Commission. The border between the two countries, which was supposed to be completed in 2003, is still not demarcated. And Ethiopia's intransigence continues to impede the peace process between the two countries. The lack of peace, Madame Chairperson, has a devastating effect on the civilian population, specially children, women and the elderly.

Madame Chairperson,

Allow me, therefore, to avail of this occasion to call upon this august Commission and the international community to pressure Ethiopia to abide by its own commitment. It has to unequivocally agree to the demarcation of the border in accordance to the ruling of the EEBC without delay to end further human suffering.

In conclusion, Madame Chairperson, we, women in Eritrea, salute the achievements of women around the world, and renew our solidarity and commitment to the goals we declared and charted together in Beijing.

I thank you.