

Statement to the High-Level Plenary: Tuesday 1 March 2005, by:

Sir Emyr Jones Parry, UK Permanent Representative

on behalf of:

**Rt Hon Jacqui Smith MP, Minister of State for Industry and the
Regions and Deputy Minister for Women and Equality**

Thank you Madam Chairperson for this opportunity to contribute to this debate on behalf of the United Kingdom, and may I pay tribute to the previous speakers who have spoken today.

I would like to begin by noting the historic milestone that provides the background to this session of the Commission. Ten years ago women from around the world came together in Beijing and agreed a remarkable document – the Beijing Declaration and Programme for Action. The UK fully subscribes to the position set out by Luxembourg on behalf of the EU that the Beijing and Beijing +5 documents must remain the basis for our work in achieving our goal: full equality between women and men and the full enjoyment by women of all human rights. That is why the UK, Madam Chair, will be working during this Commission for an unequivocal reaffirmation of Beijing without reservation.

In the United Kingdom much of our recent work in taking forward the Beijing agenda has concentrated on women and the economy. It is our view that one of the key elements of achieving gender equality is for women to be economically empowered and play a full and equal part in the economy. To achieve this we must place women at the centre of our economic and social thinking. And we must break down stereotypes, eliminate disadvantages and ensure that workplaces increasingly become an environment that actively welcomes and nurtures women.

We also need to ensure that more women are playing a full role and making the decisions that affect our economic life. The UK is committed, for example, to increasing the numbers of women who join the boards of our top companies, to supporting women in starting their own businesses and to helping women combine their work and family lives.

The business case for diversity and equality is overwhelming, the moral case is irresistible and together we must work to ensure that the economic empowerment of women is irreversible.

All of this at the centre of the European Union's Lisbon Agenda which aims to make Europe's economies not only competitive and rich in skills, enterprise and innovation. But it also aims to make women a full and equal partner with men in achieving it.

And so it must also be for the Millennium Development Goals. Gender Equality must not only be viewed in the strict terms of MDG 3. Gender Equality is central to the achievement of all the MDGs.

The figures show us why:

- Two thirds of the 1.2 billion people living in extreme poverty are women
- Two thirds of the world's illiterate people are women
- Almost half of the 40 million people world wide with HIV are women; and in sub Saharan Africa 80% of infected 15-19 year olds are women.

Women will not play a full part in the global economy and enjoy fully equal status until we recognise these facts and ensure programmes for poverty eradication address the special position of women, until we work to ensure the Cairo goal of universal sexual and reproductive health rights, and until we have made progress on sustainable development to protect the environment women live and work in.

Madam Chairperson,

All of the MDGs are relevant to women and women are relevant to the achievement of all the MDGs. Let us not forget this as we look forward to the Millennium Review Summit later this year.

Achieving the MDGs will also require reliable and predictable finance. That is why the UK is calling on all countries to join with us in implementing a new International Finance Facility to offer the immediate, predictable longer term aid needed to meet the MDGs.

But economic well being and economic success are only part of the story. We must all strive to eliminate any discrimination against women. The UK was an early signatory to the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1981. However, many years have passed since then and others have taken up the challenge with the development of the Optional Protocol, giving individuals new rights of petition against discrimination. I am delighted to tell you that at the very end of 2004 the UK formally submitted its signature to, and ratification of, that Optional Protocol.

Madam Chairperson

The Beijing Declaration was a landmark in the development of gender equality; it is still a beacon for progress into the future — for all women. And its implementation is important if we are to achieve the MDGs. It is the responsibility of all of us here, in this historic anniversary year, to ensure Beijing is not simply our shared history, it must also be our shared present and our shared future.