

Human Rights Council

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Statement

by

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Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,

It is my great honour and pleasure to address this historic first session of the Human Rights Council.

The Charter of the United Nations holds the promise of the equal rights of men and women – realizing this promise remains one of the great unfulfilled tasks of the international community. Last April, the General Assembly made a decisive step forward by adopting, by an overwhelming majority, its resolution 60/251 which established the Council mandated by the 2005 World Summit. The resolution created a vision for a world where human rights, peace and human development for all women and men go hand in hand, reinforcing each other. This is a testimony of the strong commitment and resolve of the international community to the advancement of fundamental human rights and freedoms for all.

The creation of this Council raised the bar for all Member States, but in particular for the Council's members, by requiring them to “uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights” and use their membership to promote human rights around the world.

Allow me to congratulate you, the first members of the Human Rights Council, on your election which is a significant indication of your commitment to human rights. Your voluntary pledges give real hope for enhanced promotion and protection of human rights internationally and nationally and much needed improvement in the lives of millions of women, men and children throughout the world. You have a heavy responsibility to establish effective procedures and mechanisms, which will provide the United Nations a critical opportunity to address the gap between human rights norms and reality on the ground.

Gender equality is an integral part of the new vision for human rights. Inequality between women and men hampers sound economic development, stability and social

harmony. Without women's participation, the achievement of the goals of development, peace and human rights is seriously constrained. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by violence, conflict, poverty, illiteracy, discrimination and human rights violations and are thus primary stakeholders in transformation of the United Nations into an effective, action-oriented and gender sensitive organization.

Reflecting close links between gender equality and human rights, the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women reaffirmed that the human rights of women are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. The Beijing Platform for Action, adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women, recognized that the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by women and girls is a priority for Governments and the United Nations, and is essential for the advancement of women.

In a further development, at the occasion of the 10-year review and appraisal of the Beijing Platform for Action in 2005, Member States underlined that the implementation of the Platform for Action and the fulfilment of the obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women are mutually reinforcing in achieving gender equality.

These synergies between gender equality and human rights were further expanded at the 2005 World Summit, when world leaders reaffirmed that gender equality and the full enjoyment of human rights are essential to advance development and peace and security. They further reaffirmed that the full and effective implementation of the goals and objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome of the 23rd special session of the General Assembly is an essential contribution to achieving the internationally agreed goals. They committed to the full and effective implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security and emphasized the need to pay special attention to the human rights of women and children and undertook to advance them in every possible way, including by bringing gender and child protection perspectives into the human rights agenda. The Summit also stressed the importance of gender mainstreaming and pledged to increase the capacity of the United Nations in this regard.

The Human Rights Council has thus a historic opportunity, and responsibility to ensure that promotion of gender equality is indeed an integral part of its work, so that gender-based discrimination and disadvantages women continue to face in the realization and full enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms are addressed and overcome. The new Council will also be better placed to address situations of gross and systematic violations of women's human rights. [Its ability to meet throughout the year, and when necessary for longer than the Commission has done, will allow the Council to sound the alarm and bring urgent human rights crises to the attention of the world community. At the same time, the Council will preserve the best features of the Commission, including the use of independent rapporteurs and the opportunity for non-governmental organizations to play their essential role in the Organization's human rights work.]

Attention to the gender perspectives in the promotion and protection of human rights should be an integral part of all aspects of the Council's work programme and working methods. It should be built into the terms of reference of all procedures and mechanisms, and reflected in all processes which the Council will set up in pursuit of its mandate. Adequate monitoring and accountability should be built into such an endeavour. To that end, the Council should seek to establish early interaction with the Commission on the Status of Women.

Much effort has been devoted over a number of years to strengthen the links between the Commission on Human Rights and the Commission on the Status of Women so that these close linkages might be properly reflected in policy and practice. There has been regular inter-action between the two commissions, directly and through the coordination role of the Economic and Social Council. The two Commissions have traditionally taken into account the work carried out by each in an effort to strengthen policy guidance on gender equality. The special procedures of the Commission on Human Rights have addressed the specific challenges faced by women in achieving equality with men. The Commission on Human Rights also created important mechanisms, most prominently the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, and also directed many of its non-conventional mechanisms to integrate gender perspectives into their work.

The practical realization of the principle of equality of women and men requires a holistic, consistent, determined, and sustained effort. This effort needs to be an integral part of the work of all entities of the United Nations system as well as expert and intergovernmental bodies, including the work of this Council.

The strengthening of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights with a dedicated Section on Women's Rights, will enhance United Nations capacity to monitor and report on women's rights violations. Together with the Division for the Advancement of Women, we are working closely with the High Commissioner and the Committee on Elimination of Discrimination against Women to give women's rights the central place they deserve in the new institutional human rights machinery.

Violence against women, as a persisting violation of women's human rights that affects women in all countries, in all situations, particularly in post-disaster and post-conflict areas, was one of the issues that received significant attention in the Summit Outcome. Violence is increasingly becoming one of the most important priorities for action by intergovernmental bodies, United Nations entities, Governments and non-governmental organizations. The Secretary-General's study on violence against women, requested by the General Assembly in December 2003 and being prepared by our Division for the Advancement of Women, is expected to support the Council in its efforts to address violence against women. The study will be submitted to the sixty-first session. I urge you to pay special attention in your country specific and universal reviews to anti-violence legislation, including provisions for the prosecution of perpetrators; national action plans for elimination of violence and awareness-raising and information dissemination campaigns.

The World Summit and the on-going reform of the United Nations offer fresh opportunities to intensify implementation of global commitments to women and women's rights. While the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action should remain our ultimate goal, we must be vigilant against any attempts to roll back or dilute any of the Beijing and Vienna language and commitments. This is particularly relevant in light of a general backlash against women's rights that is increasingly threatening women's human rights gains world-wide. The backlash has taken many forms: a surge in domestic violence and gender-based violence in general, including egregious violations of women's human rights; the targeted victimisation of many women and girls in armed conflicts; a reluctance or refusal to allow women to adequately participate in decision making; a reinforced tendency to stereotype gender roles to the detriment of women's liberty to freely choose how to lead their lives; and efforts to roll back commitments on reproductive health issues.

Distinguished delegates,

By creating the Human Rights Council, the international community seized an historic opportunity to significantly strengthen the United Nations' capacity to promote and protect human rights worldwide. The success of the Council depends on the good will of its members to uphold the values and honour the commitments made at its inception. The Council needs to be strong and principled, and to operate with integrity. It needs to move the United Nations beyond mere standard-setting on paper into an era of human rights enforcement. It needs to hold all member states to their human rights obligations fairly and equally, without selectivity or double standards. The implementation of the Council's recommendations and resolutions is an area in which great progress is needed - this should be a fundamental yard-stick with which States' cooperation and good faith with regard to the Council should be measured. Finally, gender equality and women's human rights needs to be mainstreamed in all aspects and procedures of the Council.

I welcome the strengthening of the human rights system and in particular the creation of the Human Rights Council which gives us the opportunity to accelerate the implementation of policies aimed at the promotion of gender equality. We cannot afford to miss the opportunities presented by the Summit and the creation of the Council to change the direction for our world, so that women and girls everywhere will reap the benefits. My Office and the Division for the Advancement of Women, which services the work of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, look forward to support the work of the Council in any way possible.

Thank you.