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## **Commission on the Status of Women**

### **Fifty-fifth session**

22 February-4 March 2011

Agenda item 3 (b)

**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”: emerging issues, trends and new approaches to issues affecting the situation of women or equality between women and men**

## **Gender equality and sustainable development**

### **Moderator’s summary**

1. On 1 March 2011, the Commission on the Status of Women convened an interactive expert panel to examine the emerging issue “Gender equality and sustainable development”. The present moderator’s summary serves as an input to the preparatory process for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, to be held in Rio de Janeiro in May 2012. The Conference focuses on two main themes: (a) a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication; and (b) the institutional framework for sustainable development.
2. The discussion was moderated by Ms. Leysa Sow, Vice-Chair of the Commission. The panellists were: Ms. Henrietta Elizabeth Thompson, Executive Coordinator, United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development; Ms. Monique Essed-Fernandes, Interim Director, Women’s Environment and Development Organization; Mr. Robert Freling, Executive Director, Solar Electric Light Fund; and Ms. Albina Ruiz, founder and President, Grupo Ciudad Saludable (Healthy Cities Group), Peru.
3. While the relevance of gender equality and women’s empowerment for sustainable development has long been established in intergovernmental commitments, such as the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development<sup>1</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992*, vol. I, *Resolutions Adopted by the Conference* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigendum), resolution 1, annex I.

Agenda 21,<sup>2</sup> and the Beijing Declaration<sup>3</sup> and Platform for Action,<sup>4</sup> it has become increasingly evident that women's contributions to sustainable development are both undervalued and underutilized.

4. The Conference presents an unprecedented opportunity to assess the progress in the implementation of international agreements on gender equality and women's empowerment in the context of sustainable development, and identify gaps and renew commitments to action in gender-responsive sustainable development processes, institutional frameworks and finance mechanisms, and to women's participation in decision-making at all levels. Applying a human rights-based approach to sustainable development could assist in this process. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women<sup>5</sup> provides the framework needed to hold States parties accountable for progress.

5. Participation, decision-making and management roles of women are critical to sustainable development processes and governance at local, national and international levels, where they can be effective agents of change. Surveys in developed countries have found that women, owing to lifestyle and consumption patterns, seem to be more concerned about the environment and have a greater sense of responsibility towards achieving sustainable development. There are indications that women tend to hold themselves more accountable as consumers, are more likely to recycle, and use public transportation more often than men.

6. Measures need to be taken to ensure that women participate fully in the discourse on economic development, social progress and environmental protection and management, including in the design and implementation of adaptation and mitigation measures in response to climate change. According to a recent report from the private sector, companies where women are more strongly represented at board- or top management-level are also those that perform best, suggesting that increased numbers of women in leadership and decision-making positions could generate a greater diversity of "green" solutions and more effective contributions to sustainable development. Participatory processes that involve end-users of technology — men and women at the household and community levels — help ensure that technologies are developed with a view to contributing to gender equality and women's empowerment. However, women's lack of or limited access to resources, such as land, clean water and affordable energy, hinders their full participation in a green economy, and puts them at greater risk in times of natural disasters. So-called women's spokes platforms have proved to be useful forums for engaging women's organizations with Governments and other stakeholders at both national and international levels.

7. Women's and girls' access to education, training and capacity development holds the key to their empowerment and improved livelihoods. Targeted public support can ensure that women and girls have equal opportunities in education and training, in particular in areas, such as science and technology where they lag behind men and boys. This would allow women to play a stronger role in research and development, for example, on environmentally sound technologies.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., annex II.

<sup>3</sup> *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4-15 September 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.13), chap. I, resolution 1, annex I.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., annex II.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. 1249, No. 20378.

Governments, in collaboration with academia and civil society, also need to take steps to redesign educational curricula and teaching materials so as to address current environmental challenges and the threats posed by climate change and their differentiated impact on women and men. Vocational training can help ensure women's and girls' enhanced knowledge, skills and capacity in the installation, use and repair of green technologies and systems. Such skills would not only contribute towards enhancing women's opportunities to find decent work and full employment but also open up new entrepreneurial opportunities for them. Microfinance is an important tool for promoting women's economic empowerment, particularly if it goes hand in hand with a growth plan designed to prevent women from falling into unmanageable debt patterns. This would require improved assessment, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms of microfinance provisions.

8. Some 1.6 billion people in the world live "off the grid", with no access to electricity. Energy poverty, particularly in rural areas, is a major challenge in every dimension of people's lives. For example, more than 3 billion people rely on open fires and traditional cooking stoves utilizing biofuels, with the responsibility for collecting the requisite firewood falling primarily on women and children, who may spend several hours per day fulfilling their households' energy needs. Investments in clean and affordable energy, such as solar power, not only contribute to freeing up the time needed by women and girls to pursue education and income-generating activities, but also promote the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and help address the challenge of climate change.

9. Solar power is increasingly used in both developed and developing countries and the number of "solar home systems" has increased over the past two decades as the costs of related technology have declined. In some countries, the private sector has played an important role in promoting investments in solar energy and other renewable energy sources. Developing countries have the opportunity to leapfrog directly towards utilizing clean energy sources; and research has illustrated that extending the grid to rural and remote areas in developing countries is neither cost-effective nor practical. Diesel engines are noisy and their utilization is expensive in the long run, and contributes to climate change, and therefore may not be a sustainable option. While solar power requires immediate upfront investments in costly solar panels, it may be a viable and more cost-effective solution in the long run; microcredit could assist households and communities in covering the immediate investments in solar panels. Experience shows that solar power has been effectively used to power homes, schools and health centres and has provided access to information and communications technology (ICT). It has also been used to pump and purify water: solar-powered water pumping systems with drip irrigation have helped increase agricultural output in women's collectives, and allowed women's businesses to grow, thereby contributing to enhanced food security and women's economic empowerment.

10. Effective and safe waste management is a challenge in both developed and developing countries. Globally, some 20 million people earn their living from collecting solid waste — often in unhealthy conditions — within the informal sector. In some countries, efforts have been made to recognize and formalize this work through providing waste pickers with social safety nets, access to credit, education and training in recycling management, certification and safety equipment, such as gloves, masks and vehicles. In many countries where waste material has been left uncollected, particularly in poor neighbourhoods and slums, women and

men have turned this challenge into income-generating opportunities. In some countries, waste has been used for the generation of electricity, and recycled material for the production of shoes, bags and other consumer goods. Training programmes on dealing with solid waste management have been targeted at staff at municipal levels, and in some countries, training programmes on recycling have been made available to the general public.

11. Women's community-based and grass-roots initiatives in the green economy have the potential, if brought to scale, to contribute substantially to sustainable development. This requires the ongoing promotion of women's initiatives by enhancing their access to economic, financial and environmental resources (for example, land), and a broadening of the impact of those initiatives. Women's community initiatives should be linked to and supported by holistic, multisectoral and participatory national planning, policy and budget frameworks.

12. A variety of institutional mechanisms, legislative provisions, plans, policies and programmes have been established to promote gender equality and sustainable development. However, gender equality and environmental protection are often considered two separate cross-cutting issues and as a result, insufficient attention has been paid to the synergies, interrelationships and feedback mechanisms linking the two issues. Some key challenges that need to be addressed at the institutional level include creating a common understanding among government agencies of the importance of women's participation in the green economy, and tackling the impact of vested interests in some key environmental resources and services-related areas, through, for example, ensuring the transparency of public procurement processes. This presents an opportunity to step up efforts to promote gender equality and sustainable development in an integrated and holistic manner so as to facilitate more sustainable and inclusive economic growth and human well-being.

13. Since political will is a key factor for success, Governments need to take the lead in adopting and implementing green economic-legal frameworks, policies, strategies and programmes, with civil society and the private sector as important partners. These frameworks need to be supported by long-term financial provisions, including through official development assistance (ODA). Gender-responsive budgeting can help ensure more equitable and effective resource allocations and foster distributional outcomes that favour gender equality. Sex-disaggregated data and indicators should be used to enable Governments to make informed decisions. The United Nations system, civil society, academia and the private sector play important roles in making available to governments the data, information, research, lessons learned and good practices needed to inform the promotion of gender equality within a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication. At the global level, there is a need for an agreement on a core set of indicators on sustainable development and economic growth which measure gender equality, and women's empowerment and participation.

14. In conclusion, the moderator noted the key role of Governments in the realization of sustainable development. She highlighted the following: national economic planning, policy and budget frameworks that failed to recognize the links among gender equality, economic growth and poverty reduction, and that failed to involve women in their realization, would limit opportunities for countries to move towards sustainable development. Increasing the number of women in leadership and decision-making positions could lead to greater diversity of green technological

solutions. Similarly, increasing investments in sustainable infrastructure, for example, in clean energy, water and sanitation, could contribute to strengthening women's economic empowerment and limiting their engagement in unpaid work.

### **Recommendations emanating from the discussion**

- Ensure women's effective participation in the preparatory processes leading up to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development
- Promote participatory dialogues among Governments, civil society and the private sector with respect to developing and implementing gender-responsive policy and budget frameworks for sustainable development
- Ensure that international conventions on environmental issues integrate the issues of gender equality and women's empowerment and full participation
- Appoint a special rapporteur on the right to energy
- Identify opportunities for women to turn green practices into profitable business opportunities, and compile good practices that can be replicated and scaled up globally
- Conduct an assessment of women's opportunities and participation in a green economy within the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication
- Reinforce international cooperation and increase the participation of women scientists in the protection and documentation of biodiversity, and in respect of global awareness of the role of responsible consumption in the attainment of sustainable development.

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