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Statement by Ambassador Melanne Verveer, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues and Representative of the United States to the UN Commission on the Status of Women, at the 55th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, at U.N.

Headquarters

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New York, NY

February 28, 2011

AS PREPARED

Thank you. It is a pleasure for me to be here at the UN Commission on the Status of Women, especially as we usher in a new era for women's progress with the formal launch of UN Women. It was just a year ago in this forum that the CSW went on record to indicate its support for a new organization for the world's women. Today UN Women is a reality, with a dynamic, experienced, and distinguished leader, President Michelle Bachelet, as the new Under-Secretary-General. When he appointed her, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stressed that UN Women had been a "top priority" and "will promote the interests of women and girls around the globe." We thank the Secretary-General for his leadership, and I know we are all committed to working with and supporting UN Women so that it can achieve its full potential as a powerful institution for women's equality and empowerment.

I also want to recognize another groundbreaking appointment at the UN this past year in Special Representative of the Secretary General Margot Wallström, who is working hard and needs the support of all of us to implement Resolution 1888 – to combat sexual violence in conflict. For, as Secretary Clinton said at the 10th anniversary of UN Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security: "The only way to achieve our goals — to reduce the number of conflicts around the world, to eliminate rape as a weapon of war, to combat the culture of impunity for sexual violence, to build sustainable peace — is to draw on the full contributions of both women and men in every aspect of peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding."

I also want to thank the co-head of the U.S. delegation, Ambassador Susan Rice, for leading the work of the United States at the United Nations to advance women's rights on a range of issues, from economic empowerment and increased women's participation in political processes, to ending sexual violence in conflict situations.

It was also here a year ago that we reviewed the unfinished business of the Beijing Platform for Action—an agenda that continues to serve as an ambitious blueprint against which we chart women's progress around the globe. As we address the CSW agenda before us, we are guided by the Platform's imperatives on girls' education, and the promotion of women's economic participation and access to science and technology.

And it was at the United Nations last September that we focused on our collective progress in meeting the Millennium Development Goals. This session underscored the need for a strong commitment to women's equality, which stands both as a goal in its own right and also an essential tool to achieving all the MDGs.

Much has been accomplished, but much remains to be achieved. Ours is an unfinished agenda that we recommit ourselves to advancing in this CSW.

Girls' Education

This year's CSW rightly focuses renewed attention on girls' education. It is, as we know, the single most effective development investment that can be made and a key driver of economic growth and social progress.

Since 2000, when the world committed to Millennium Development Goal 2 – achievement of universal primary education – and adopted the Education for All agenda, millions more boys and girls are now attending and completing primary school. Today, almost two-thirds of developing countries have met the goal of eliminating gender disparity in primary education.

However, despite the progress that has been made in increasing access to primary education, considerable gaps remain, particularly for girls. According to the Education for All Global Monitoring Report, 72 million children are out of school, and 54% of the unschooled are girls. In addition, although gender parity in primary education has increased over the past decade, a parity gap of 6 million still remains. In Yemen, nearly 80% of girls out of school are unlikely to enroll, as compared with 36% of boys. In sub-Saharan Africa, almost 12 million girls are expected not to enroll.

In addition, significant barriers impede girls' access to education at both the primary and secondary levels, including restricted mobility, concerns about safety, early and forced marriage, sexual assault, unwanted pregnancy, female genital mutilation, family responsibilities, and many others. In part because of these barriers, girls are also significantly less likely than boys to make the transition from primary to secondary education. The consequences of this disparity in access to education can follow girls for a lifetime. Of the nearly 759 million illiterate adults, two-thirds are women.

Furthermore, even where school enrollment has increased, too often children are leaving school without acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills. This is even more serious now in an ever-increasing ICT world, where a digital divide already exists. In some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, young adults with five years of education had a 40% probability of illiteracy. In particular, far too little attention has been paid to the quality of education at the early primary level, which is critical to success in primary school, as well as at the post-primary level, which is vital to future economic opportunity, good health, and other development benefits.

Girls' education is valuable both in its own right and because it fuels development. Educating girls yields a higher rate of return in the developing world than any other investment. Incentivizing girls' education—and, in particular, girls' secondary education—leads to a host of positive community outcomes, from delayed marriage and childbirth to healthier pregnancies and families. Children of educated mothers are more likely to survive, have adequate nutrition, and are more likely to attend school themselves. Girls' education also boosts income later in life: an extra year of primary school increases girls' future wages by an estimated 10 to 20 percent, and an extra year of secondary school increases future wages by 15 to 25 percent.

With fewer than five years left to meet the Education for All and Millennium Development Goals, it is long past time to tackle the barriers that keep far too many girls illiterate and out of school. Improving access to and the quality of girls' education around the world is essential to achieving the development outcomes that we seek and to promoting gender equality and is a top priority for all of us as we commit ourselves to addressing the agenda before us.

Science and Technology

Science and technology education for women and girls is essential in the 21st century's knowledge society and economy. It is important for creating future researchers, entrepreneurs, and workers, as well as knowledgeable citizens who can participate fully in local and national political decisions on these issues.

President Obama has made clear his vision for science and technology as engines of economic growth and as fundamental to the achievement of our collective vision for a more peaceful, secure, prosperous, and equitable world. Solving the challenges of under-nutrition, the spread of disease, environmental pollution, and so much more will depend on tapping into the best ideas – the ideas of men and women everywhere in the world. We are not taking full advantage of the talents of women and girls in science, technology, engineering, and math. Not to do so is to shortchange them and our world.

In the United States we are putting a strong focus on advancing women and girls in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) through support for best practices.

For example, the National Science Foundation supports the ADVANCE program to increase the representation and advancement of women in academic science, technology, engineering, and math careers, thereby contributing to the development of a more diverse science and engineering workforce.

The National Institutes of Health adopted a reentry program, which offers support for women and men to reenter scientific research after having interrupted their research careers to attend to family or other personal responsibilities. NIH also supports research to understand the factors involved in decision-making by women to leave laboratory research.

NASA supports the "Women of NASA" interactive project to provide role models of outstanding women working in diverse fields at NASA who have succeeded and continue to thrive in math, science, and technology careers.

The Department of Energy launched, in 2010, the Clean Energy Education and Empowerment (C3E) Initiative to inspire the next generation of young women clean energy leaders through opportunities to interact with mentors and role models who have risen to the top of the field; support talented young women in pursuing clean energy-related studies, through scholarships; and provide real-life hands-on experience through team research opportunities in partnership with leading academic institutions and industry.

Technology and Development

Technology has the potential to transform women's lives around the world by providing critical access to information, mitigating severe health and safety risks, and creating an opportunity for financial security and independence. Yet in too many instances, women still lack access to these tools and the potential benefits they represent.

Mobile technology is an essential tool to enable poor women to transform their lives. A farmer in sub-Saharan Africa can learn how to protect her crops from pests that would otherwise destroy a harvest. An entrepreneur in Latin America can more easily obtain a business license or communicate with a mentor or a customer. A woman in Asia can use her mobile banking to control her family finances or budget for school fees or save for a new house. Expectant mothers who live nowhere near a clinic can still receive prenatal health tips. Students whose teachers rarely show up at school can still move ahead with their lessons.

Yet for 300 million women in low- and middle-income countries, mobile technology is still out of reach. It is not simply because it is too expensive, because many women's husbands and their sons have cell phones, but it is because of an array of economic and social barriers, from a lack of literacy to a lack of income to the all-too-common belief that cell phones afford more freedom to women than they deserve.

To address these challenges, Secretary Clinton launched the mWomen initiative last October, in partnership with the GSMA, the industry association of mobile service providers, the Cherie Blair Foundation, and many others, which aims to reduce the gender gap by 50 percent in the next three years. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has announced a grant to GSMA to identify a business model to make the case for a market to women at the bottom of the pyramid. We hope that other countries will join this initiative through policy support and public advocacy. Together we can bring mobile technology to poor women and empower them to improve their lives and lift up their families out of poverty.

And this week an all-women technology delegation is traveling on behalf of the U.S. Department of State to West Africa to explore how technology can increase opportunities for women and girls. During their visit to Liberia and Sierra Leone, they will focus on advancing the mWomen Initiative to increase the number of mobile phones in the hands of women and girls.

TechWomen

In response to President Obama's call for expanded educational exchanges and new opportunities in entrepreneurship, innovation, and science, the U.S. government created the TechWomen Program to provide professional peer mentorships for emerging leaders in technology from North Africa and the Middle East with their counterparts in the United States.

Championing two distinct but equally key themes of President Obama's June 2009 Cairo speech, TechWomen both supports development in the field of technology and empowers women. By facilitating the sharing of experience and knowledge, as well as creating peer networks, TechWomen fosters professional development for women and creates sustainable relationships across borders.

Education, technology, and innovation are also essential to enhancing agricultural productivity. We know that women comprise the great majority of small farmers around the globe. They are the backbone of farming in most of the world. In the words of Secretary Clinton: "They plant the seeds, they till the fields, they harvest the crops, they bring them to market, they prepare the meals for their families. So to succeed in this work, we must work with women. And so we need a good collaboration to make sure that women are equal partners with men farmers all the way through the process."

On a trip to Kenya's Agricultural Research Institute last year, Secretary Clinton underscored that a comprehensive approach to agriculture must connect the tools developed in labs to the fields where the farmers are every day, the markets where the crops are bought and sold, and the classrooms where farmers can learn to grow more food with less labor and less water.

That is why we are supporting the African Women in Agricultural Research and Development program (AWARD) to help women scientists working to improve farming and to fight hunger and poverty. Women need to be on the front line of the changes that are needed for greater productivity. They need to be represented in our laboratories as well as our fields. In its second year in 2009, AWARD has provided fellowships to 120 women scientists from 10 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. As Secretary Clinton said, the women scientists "will be the fertile ground that will grow the seeds of progress and prosperity, and that will enable the 70 percent of farmers who are women to make a contribution that will transform agriculture, add to the gross domestic product of their country, give them more income to educate their children to have a better life."

And in the United States, the Department of Agriculture is supporting research and extension programs to increase the participation of women and underrepresented minorities from rural areas in STEM fields that are relevant to agriculture, thereby contributing to economic prosperity in rural areas across the nation.

Clean Cookstoves

Women also lack access to another type of technology that also has the power to be life-saving – clean cookstoves and fuels. Exposure to smoke from traditional stoves and open fires – the primary means of cooking and heating for 3 billion people in developing countries – causes almost 2 million deaths annually, with women and young children affected most. That is a life lost every 16 seconds.

The use of efficient cookstoves can dramatically reduce fuel consumption and exposure to harmful smoke. More efficient stoves also reduce the time people (usually women and girls) have to spend collecting fuel, which, particularly in areas of conflict, could also reduce the likelihood of their exposure to gender-based violence. Since stoves last for several years, the accumulated savings in time and cost can be invested back into families, communities, and economies.

Reductions in emissions achieved by clean cookstoves will not only benefit the environment, but also have the potential to create revenues from carbon credits. In addition, women can be trained and provided with capital to start businesses around the sale, distribution, maintenance, and repair of clean cookstoves and fuels. The entire clean cookstoves supply-chain can and should be a source of economic opportunity and job creation, particularly for women.

To address the need for clean cookstoves, the United States has committed over \$50 million as a founding member of the Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves, an innovative public-private partnership launched by Secretary Clinton last fall. The Alliance's goal is for 100 million homes to adopt clean and efficient stoves and fuels by 2020. The Alliance, led by the United Nations Foundation, has already brought together leading private companies, governments, local NGOs, women's groups, and stove manufacturers. We hope that additional governments will join the Alliance. It is an investment with high yield dividends for women and girls.

Women and Green Jobs

Women can gain a stronger position in the workforce through green jobs. The emerging green economy is shaping employment opportunities. It is increasing the demand for and changing the requirements of many existing jobs, while generating new ones.

Every day, women are starting their own businesses. In fact, in the United States, women-owned businesses grew at twice the national average for all other business types between 1997 and 2008. An estimated 10.1 million companies, or 40% of all privately-owned firms, were owned by women as of 2008. We know that women-run small and medium sized businesses are accelerators of economic growth.

The growing commitment to sustainability has increased the demand for green products and services. This in turn creates opportunities for women to start their own green businesses, in areas as diverse as sustainable agriculture and forestry, clean energy, environmental protection, recycling, and waste reduction.

In the United State, the Department of Labor is focusing on expanding the new green economy for women. Targeted efforts on the part of policymakers, employers, workforce professionals, training and education providers, and advocates should focus on ensuring that women recognize the opportunity presented by green occupations and are able to fully participate in and benefit from the new green economy. Women have made great strides in some male-dominated occupations, yet still represent only a small portion of the workers in these jobs.

We also know that women confront barriers in starting or expanding small and medium sized businesses, such as barriers in access to training, mentors, finance, technology, markets among others. These challenges need to be addressed if women's potential to grow economies and increase their livelihoods is going to be fully tapped.

Gender and Climate Change

We often hear how women are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. However, women are already playing a critical role in combating climate change. We must do a better job of promoting their continued and expanding role in finding solutions to this urgent global challenge. Women should have an equal seat at the table during discussions regarding climate related policies, including how resources will be allocated to address the climate challenge, to ensure that women's voices are being heard and their knowledge of local environments can be leveraged to develop more effective solutions that benefit whole families and communities.

In addition, to further advance the capacity of women in addressing climate change policy, the United States is pleased to announce a new international exchange program, which will target women climate leaders from the developing world and the critical role they play in developing climate-related policies. Participants will travel to the United States for three weeks to learn about the development of new policies related to climate change mitigation and adaptation, as well as information about cutting edge small scale clean technologies and how to promote women's entrepreneurship opportunities and markets for them in their countries. This is but one way we can address the need for women to play an effective and necessary role in developing climate change policies.

The U.S. delegation and I look forward to working with you in these remaining days of this 55th session of the CSW and, in the months ahead, through UN Women, bilaterally, and through fora around the globe. Secretary Clinton often reminds us that "talent is universal, but opportunity is not." Let us work together to ensure that women and girls have the opportunity to fulfill their God-given potential, to improve their lives and the lives of their families, and to create a better world for all.

Thank you.

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