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Executive Briefing for the Second Committee

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Gender mainstreaming: A challenge to business as usual?

Mr. Chairperson,
Distinguished delegates,
Colleagues.

I welcome this opportunity to provide an executive briefing to members of the Second Committee. Mr. Chairperson, I also commend you and the Bureau for initiating this series of dialogues.

I would like to address the topic of gender mainstreaming. Together with the discussion in the Second Committee of item 97 (g) on women in development on 3 November, and the informal briefing convened by the Division for the Advancement of Women together with UNDP on 29 October, I see today's gathering as an opportunity to exchange views with members of the Second Committee on gender mainstreaming and to brief you on developments in this area in the UN system.

Earlier this year the Secretary-General designated me as his Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women. I carry out these functions with the support of the Division for the Advancement of Women, which I head, and the Focal Point on the Status of Women in the Secretariat. I also chair the ACC Inter-agency Committee on Women and Gender Equality, again supported by the DAW.

One of my major responsibilities as Special Adviser focuses on gender mainstreaming as a strategy for achieving the goal of gender equality and a better society for all. This includes the application of gender analysis in the work of the UN system as a matter of course. Through gender analysis, the impact of the UN's work on the lives of women and men becomes more transparent, and policy and other measures for improving outcomes for women can be designed, implemented and monitored. The achievement of gender balance is integral to this goal.

At its last session in July, the ECOSOC proposed a comprehensive approach for mainstreaming gender in the work of the UN, both at the intergovernmental and the institutional level. Of particular interest to this audience are the recommendations addressed to the Assembly that cover issues dealt with by the Second Committee. The Council singled out areas such as

macroeconomic questions, operational activities for development and poverty eradication for systematic mainstreaming of a gender perspective. Global commitment to gender equality and to mainstreaming as a strategy is reflected in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, complemented by other Conference decisions such as Vienna, Cairo and Copenhagen, and by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

These are neither simple, nor straightforward times. Member States of the United Nations, individually at the national level, in regional groupings and in a joint and cooperative approach at the international level, are grappling with many complex, often puzzling questions that elude easy answers. For many, gender issues are among those that defy easy solutions.

During the 1990s, a series of United Nations conferences charted a new global agenda for economic and social development, and member states made firm commitments to achieving goals ranging from the protection of the environment, the eradication of poverty, to sustainable human settlements. Women's equality and the protection and promotion of their human rights is integral to these goals. We have to be concerned, however, with the scope and speed of implementation, and with the tangible results achieved.

The Agenda for Development now adopted provides a comprehensive framework for more effective and efficient development cooperation. The UN Development Assistance Framework which is now under consideration, is also expected to respond comprehensively to the concerns and needs of women and men.

The current trend of globalization and market liberalization preoccupies us all. With it come new opportunities and benefits for many, but with it also comes the downside: disparities and inequalities are exacerbated, certain population groups and countries are being marginalized, wealth and poverty are polarized. The roles of the State and of the private sector are changing. The emphasis is on market forces in resource allocation. Advances in science and technology, the unprecedented accessibility of information and communications and new migration patterns, are transforming intra- and inter-state relations. How best can these forces be channeled so as to spread benefits more broadly, to mitigate adverse effects more efficiently?

We have a better understanding now than ever before of the consequences of what we do. Unprecedented levels of knowledge, information and education enable us to generate models and scenarios for dealing with future challenges and to assemble complex data bases for decision-making. We put a premium on efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability. We want our institutions and processes to be models of this image. And we have the technology to support it.

Public institutions, whether national or international, are responsible for setting policies, providing regulatory frameworks and maintaining an enabling environment for all. They care for those who are temporarily or permanently unable to care for themselves and their families. This, we expect to be done effectively, efficiently and expeditiously.

At the same time, what is at stake is not simply the "market", the "gross national product", the "external debt". What is at stake is how human beings benefit from, or are further disadvantaged by, these concepts. Poverty eradication is not an end in itself, it has a human face in the streets of Calcutta, in the favellas of Sao Paulo, in the hills of Eastern Kentucky. More often than not, the face is female.

Globalization and market liberalization are not only about deregulated labour markets and increased exports - they are about new jobs for textile workers in Indonesia and shrinking land resources for subsistence farmers in Africa. Again, many of these workers and farmers are women.

Economic and social development is not just a series of statistics and indicators on education, health, and employment. It is also children, the majority of whom are girls, weaving carpets or making baseballs instead of going to school; it is about parents getting their children vaccinated against disease and men and women obtaining information about family planning.

No matter how abstract are the concepts that we use either to explain globalization; to track economic growth; to catalogue differences between, and within countries and regions; to serve as a basis for policy development and decision-making: these concepts all have tangible implications for women and men. It is men and women, both, who benefit from, or are disadvantaged by, the actions we take.

It is therefore crucial that we, in the international community and at the national level, take explicitly into account the concerns of both women and men, and not think only in terms of "people". Otherwise, we will ignore the differential impact of our actions on women and on men. Society as a whole benefits when we consider how women's and men's socially-constructed roles and relations impact on their ability to access political, economic and social opportunities and resources. Failure to do so will most likely perpetuate women's historical inequalities. It will keep them from having full access to rights and opportunities such as education, to land as collateral for example, or to credit, thereby reducing their ability to contribute to the positive side of the market forces of which we spoke earlier. The result is a built-in depressant to economic growth.

Women are faced with economic, political and social realities which they have little or no influence in shaping. The existing structures, processes and institutions, nationally and internationally, have caused, and perpetuated, women's lack of access to opportunities, resources, and rights. Women have lower levels of literacy. The numbers of women in decision-making remain well below the critical mass of 30 % in most countries. Women more often than men are unemployed, underemployed, work in part-time jobs, are responsible for subsistence and reproductive work for which there is no pay, no security, no pension, no benefits.

When planning an energy policy, the availability of natural resources is a basic factor of analysis. When designing employment policies, the cost of labour, competition and demand are equally basic. When building schools, demographic trends are taken into consideration. If we

want these policies to be truly efficient and beneficial, we also need to analyse who the unemployed are and in what sectors, what skills they have, and what constraints they might face in terms of mobility or training. When building a school, we also need to take into account whether distance from where children live, or the time of day or hours of continuing education or skills training will facilitate or hamper access. This applies even more to girls and women. In short, we must analyse how men's and women's socially-constructed roles and responsibilities in the home and in the community help or hinder their access to resources, opportunities, and enjoyment of rights. We have included other examples in our report to the Second Committee under item 97 (g) (A/52/345).

The World Bank, UNDP and others have demonstrated that gender relations shape the course of economic development - the distribution of work, income, wealth, and productivity. Investing in women makes good economic sense. Better educated women are better able to contribute to economic growth. Greater equality of women in terms of education, health and employment lowers maternal mortality, increases child health and survival and slows population growth. The positive correlation between women's equality and the reduction of poverty was shown most recently in the 1997 Human Development Report. In short, both micro- and macro-economic policies must be examined from a gender perspective to reveal their full implications and potential.

As we shape our vision for the 21st Century, how must we ensure that women don't end up once again as an afterthought? As we put into practice the Agenda for Development, grapple with globalization, UN reform, and other issues on this Committee's agenda?

The ECOSOC in its agreed conclusions and other bodies have reinforced the relevance of a two-pronged approach: On the one hand, we must continue to take specific actions and measures that benefit women directly so that the gaps of inequality are closed, or at least reduced. Such measures are essential, in developing and developed countries alike. They deal with the symptoms, that is with the reality of inequality caused by centuries of disadvantage and discrimination.

Secondly, we need to do more than merely recognize the symptoms. We must deal with the symptoms. Dealing with them means taking measures to ensure that every new generation of women will not find themselves caught in the same structures, processes and institutions that have maintained discrimination and inequality faced by their mothers and grandmothers. The only solution is to attack the causes that keep women in their socially-constructed places of reduced access to opportunity and of unequal treatment. If we are to achieve change - structural and lasting change - that can free generation after generation of women everywhere in the world from struggling to gain or regain ground, then we must also influence - meaning transform - the very structures, processes and institutions within which policy- and decision-making now takes place.

Global as much as local institutions must be our target. Politics, the law, economics, development cooperation, trade and finance, taxation, international transactions, structural or

other adjustment - these are the processes and institutions that can no longer be above full responsibility and accountability for the goal of gender equality. It is only when institutions and processes explicitly and visibly have as one of their objectives the achievement of gender equality that we will see the type of structural change that will bring lasting positive outcomes for women.

Whether it is in the broad sweep of UN reform or in the implementation of the Agenda for Development, in the eradication of poverty or in dealing with debt and structural adjustment, in building strategic frameworks for war-torn countries or in the efforts to put finance for development on a more predictable basis: if all these challenges do not include the achievement of gender equality as an objective in addition to including specific measures for the current generation of women to reduce inequality, we will do nothing but perpetuate the gendered roles of women as second class citizens.

Mainstreaming must be a comprehensive strategy, and one involving change: change from the business-as-usual approach to policy formulation and decision-making, from the known habits of designing development policies and service delivery. Gender mainstreaming means change from functioning in well-established structures and hierarchies, from dealing with the ever-familiar interlocutors, from adhering to traditional sources of information and from being orthodox.

Gender mainstreaming is about men and women. It calls for valuing women's experiences and expectations in the same manner as we value men's for the common good, and for social progress.

Mr. Chairperson, this is break-out time for all of us from our ways of thinking, our attitudes, our goals, our policies. Our vision of society remains imperfect and incomplete - too often, women and their vision are missing. We have the research, the ideas, the best practices, and the economic arguments, why gender equality is important in terms of economic growth and sustainable development. Gender equality is also an intensely political proposition. We, as policy makers in Governments and in the UN system, in partnership with civil society, have the ability, the energy and the responsibility to harness all these positive forces for change to build a more complete, all encompassing and participatory society, for men AND for women.

Thank you for the opportunity to brief you today. I welcome your questions and comments.