

**International Women's Day Presentation**  
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Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this distinguished panel. On the occasion of International Women's Day, particularly this year – the tenth anniversary of the Beijing Conference, we should review these UN processes in light of the reality of the status of women around the world. To my mind, whether the Millennium Development Goals fully integrate the commitments made in the Beijing Platform for Action is significant only to the extent that they are actually implemented. That is where we need to go from here, with regard to the Platform for Action as well as the Millennium Development Goals, which include gender equality and the empowerment of women. I ask in advance for your pardon if my remarks lack the softer touch of diplomacy. As we speak women are being subjected to violence and discrimination everywhere around the world, often at the cost of their lives. It is this urgency that compels me to be blunt.

From my non-governmental perspective of these UN conferences and their five-year periodic reviews, there is always much rhetorical agreement on the critical importance of implementation. But the conferences often get hijacked by negotiations over a text, as this conference was, even though the text at hand was only one page long and specifically designed to pre-empt negotiation by hardly saying anything. Reaffirmation of the Platform for Action is not progress. Not moving backward is not the same as moving forward. We lost much of last week, an important opportunity we could have used to make plans to move forward with implementation of the Platform for Action. In fact one of the great things about the Platform for Action is that it maps out concrete steps, a blueprint for moving forward.

Among the many commitments made in Beijing was one “to revoke any remaining laws that discriminate on the basis of sex.” In 2005, noting the persistence of discriminatory legislation, the Outcome Document adopted by the Beijing + 5 conference established a target date for revocation of these laws “as soon as possible, preferably by 2005.” This is 2005 and laws that discriminate against women remain in force around the world. In 1999 Equality Now highlighted a representative sampling of countries that had discriminatory laws in force covering

virtually all walks of life – employment, citizenship, property inheritance, marriage and divorce, even laws condoning violence against women. Of these 45 countries only 14 have to date changed the laws highlighted. Most recently last week the Republic of Korea amended its family law to remove discriminatory provisions. Mexico, Turkey and Morocco are also among the countries that have accomplished law reforms that do justice to this undertaking made in the Platform for Action. But for every example of action there are many more of inaction. There are still countries around the world where under the law women, unlike men, cannot drive, vote, work at night, inherit property, give evidence in court, or transmit citizenship to their spouse or their children. There are countries where wife obedience is mandated by law, where polygamy is allowed, where women have no right to divorce, and where violence against women is permitted by law. The list goes on and on.

Discriminatory laws is just one of many areas in which there has been a failure to honor the commitments made to women. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, universal human rights begin in small places, close to home. “Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity, without discrimination.” Closer to home, let’s look honestly at the status of women in the United Nations. The 50/50 gender balance goal is long overdue – the target date set for that goal was 2000, 5 years ago. As of 31 December 2004 the representation of women in the professional and higher categories was 37.1%. The General Assembly has expressed concern that there has been a “slowing of progress” and that in this category between 1998 and 2003 there was almost no progress. Of the 31 Under-Secretaries General in the senior management team only 6 are women. That is less than 20%. In 1995, noting that the United Nations was “continuing to deny itself the benefits of women’s leadership by their under-representation at decision-making levels within the Secretariat,” the Platform for Action called for the development of “mechanisms to nominate women candidates for appointment to senior posts in the United Nations.” Maybe now, ten years later, it is time to establish a serious mechanism to ensure the nomination of women candidates to serve in the most senior UN post, where there has never been a woman.

There is much talk of UN reform, and this discussion has to look more seriously at, take note of, and address the fact that women are structurally sidelined in the United Nations in numerous

ways. Following the 1993 Vienna Conference on Human Rights, a High Commissioner for Human Rights was appointed at the Under-Secretary General level. In Beijing when the Secretary-General was called on to establish a “high-level” post in his office to advise him on gender issues, an Assistant Secretary General was appointed. UNIFEM, the UN Development Fund for Women, is housed within UNDP, where it has lower status than a regional bureau of that agency. The High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change recommends upgrading the Human Rights Commission to a Human Rights Council independent of the Economic and Social Council. Meanwhile, the Commission on the Status of Women, a parallel body, is not even mentioned. The Human Rights Commission has more than 40 special rapporteurs, independent experts, working groups and special representatives of the Secretary-General on various countries and thematic issues. The Commission on the Status of Women has none. Gender equality is mentioned once in the High Level Panel report, in a passing reference to the Millennium Development Goals, although Security Council Resolution 1325 recognized the central role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflict and stressed the importance of their equal participation in negotiations. While noting the failure to effectively implement this resolution, the High Level Panel does not really address the empowerment of women, which could well be the most effective approach to security and development challenges.

There is much talk of gender mainstreaming in the UN. While gender mainstreaming is a laudable goal, it can only be seen as a complement to, not a substitute for, the gender specific focus of UNIFEM and the Division for the Advancement of Women, which need to be strengthened as do other UN structures that focus on the advancement of women in the United Nations and in the world. It should be understood that the rape and sexual exploitation of women and girls in Congo and elsewhere by UN peacekeepers, and the sexual harassment of women in UNHCR and other agencies, is not unrelated to the gender hierarchy of the United Nations. These abuses are not new by any means, just newly discovered by the media, and they have yet to be effectively addressed by the UN. Again, as Eleanor Roosevelt said, human rights begin at home.

There are many concrete steps that can be taken easily and will further efforts to implement the Platform for Action, as well as the MDG goal of gender equality. Here are a few:

1. Create a formal mechanism to ensure that the many qualified women around the world are considered in the process of appointing the next Secretary-General.
2. Give the Division for the Advancement of Women and UNIFEM, as well as the CSW, the status and resources they need to represent and work effectively for gender equality.
3. Establish a Special Rapporteur on laws that discriminate against women, the initiative that has been introduced at the CSW by the Governments of Rwanda and the Philippines. A coalition of national, regional and international NGOs from around the world, including WiLDAF in Africa, CLADEM in Latin America, Women Living Under Muslim Laws, South Asian Women's Watch, the European Women's Lobby, Amnesty International and Equality Now all support this idea, as do three former Chairs of CEDAW and its current leadership.

Often the sense in this building seems to be that gender equality is a long-term aspiration rather than an immediately attainable goal. That is not the case. The African Union has shown us what political will and leadership can do – 50/50 gender balance at the highest level of decision-making, virtually overnight. So it is possible, maybe not even that difficult.

My International Women's Day message is that words are not enough. Please take action. It is not too late to give the Beijing Platform for Action the tenth anniversary it deserves. Thank you.