

Madam Deputy Secretary-General, Madam Special Advisor, distinguished guest, colleagues and friends,

I would like to thank the Special Advisor of Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women, Ms. Rachael Mayanja, for inviting me to participate in this panel on the issue of gender balance and work-life balance. I am particularly happy to be back in NY on this International Women's Day, to celebrate this day with all of you, on the sidelines of the 51st session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

This is also a day “for protest”, of reflection on the progress achieved for women's rights as well as of searching for ways to fight continuing inequalities and the denial of rights for women, as the High Commissioner on Human Rights points out in her statement on this occasion. My task here today, is thus to reflect on the progress made in achieving gender equality in the UN system, in terms of numbers as well as in terms of the work-life balance that the system should be providing staff members, and to seek ways in which to improve the situation, and the situation needs much improvement.

Let me begin with a disclaimer. “Balance” has not been a concept against which I've measured my own personal life and career. Honestly speaking, so far, in a working life that has been rather eclectic and wide-ranged, I've barely managed to juggle the demands of a family with three kids and the demands of work. It is only in hindsight that “balance” comes to mind. Looking at specific stages in my life, I see that few were times of “balance” between my personal life and work. Indeed, many were times of intense struggle and hard choices. But in the longer-term perspective, I can see a balance of sorts, in that I am excited and honored to be where I am work-wise, as well as thankful for the family life for all of its happy moments as well as the not-so-happy ones. All this to say that I am not an expert on how to obtain or manage life-work balance in one's personal life. But I am certainly an advocate for policies in organizations that would enhance gender balance in all areas of work and free women from having to make sacrifices one way or another.

In particular, now as a senior staff member in the UN system, in that part of the system that is mandated to take the lead in protecting and promoting the human rights of all -- and women's rights are an integral part of the work -- I look at the system, and see that it is far from being the standard-setter that it should be, in terms of realizing gender equality for all who work for the system.

The stated aim of the UN is to achieve gender balance within all part of the system. In 1998, the UN established the Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women (OSAGI). It is thanks to the creation and the work of this Office, now ably lead my Ms. Mayanja, that we have achieved the progress made so far. But there is far more to do.

In terms of just numbers, overall gender balance has only been achieved at the P-1 and P-2 levels within the staff members of the UN system, with only a nominal improvement in the D-1 level. In fact, between 2004-2006, gender balance decreased at the D-1, P-5, P-3 and P-2 levels, although there was nominal increase at D-2 and P-4 levels and a 16.6% increase at the P-1 level.

An analysis on the probable causes of the slow progress in the improvement of the status of women in the Secretariat identified the working climate and culture in the Organization and informal barriers as the key factor impacting the achievement of gender balance goals. In other words, the working environment in the UN favors men and discriminates against women.

One of the most potent causes of discrimination lies in attitudes toward child care, and the inability of the work place to accommodate the needs of women and families in this regard. The heavy bias towards women as the primary givers continues. There are rules to mitigate the situation. But they are not enough. It is not enough to say that fathers can also take four weeks paternity leave and consider this as denoting gender equality. It is the culture or the office that encourages staff or discourages them from actively utilizing these rules.

The typical working pattern of the UN staff member consists of long working long hours, with little questioning of the quality or productivity of each hour worked. There is pressure to earn “merit badges” by working these long hours where you remain visible, participate in informal meetings and socializing activities after hours where important work is negotiated. This affects all employees. But given their role as care-givers back at home, women staff members are less likely to be able to participate in this arrangement. She is then perceived as less available and committed, and this affects her career advancement. That said, not all women have child care responsibilities, and yet still face the evidence of numbers.

So how do we tackle the imbalance. Let us look at what tools we have. The increase in recruitment of women at lower levels is a start, but far from enough. If we can recruit, we can also promote. Affirmative action, of selecting women where there are equally qualified men and women candidates, is a sound policy and rooted in human rights law. But this alone will not solve the problem. For senior positions, there is political consideration at work, and arguments are made for particular type of background which far fewer women than men are likely to have, such as military experience or similar background. We need to look at the rationale behind such requirements, and assess whether they are in fact necessary to the demands of the position. We also need to move away from the prejudices that men will cope better in conflict zones. The actual evidence we have, from human rights work and humanitarian and peace keeping operations, shows the contrary.

We also need to address the informal barriers. There is a provision for flexible working hours, for working from home, within the UN rules, but few take them. A UN analysis revealed that despite the progress made, the current informal managerial culture within the Secretariat views flexible working arrangements as a barrier to productivity and efficiency and, more importantly, as being incompatible with career advancement and performance in managerial-level posts. Indeed, work-life balance is perceived as a luxury, conflicting with the norm of career advancement in the UN Secretariat, which is

to work long hours and always be available. In addition, the perception among managers, that work-life policies apply only to women reinforces the stereotype that women are unable to participate fully in the work of the system and are not fully committed to their careers.

Innovative and effective work-life programs and family-friendly policies are fundamental to attracting, retaining and promoting female staff, and directly serve the UN target of 50/50 gender distribution at all post levels. This is an issue of management. The point of performance appraisal is to evaluate performance, and this should not be location specific. If by facilitating home plus office work, we can encourage greater gender parity, then this is what we must do. We should also encourage men to make the most of the rules that facilitate their parental roles and participation in family life. The work/life balance should be as relevant to men. They miss out on a huge chunk of life if they continue to think that family is something that is offered them on a platter by women. Men and boys must play an active role for gender equality to be realized inside and outside the home.

Removing discrimination and achieving gender equality requires a change in organizational climate. We need to address head-on the cause of discrimination. We need to develop and adopt programs which support and encourage work-life balance and policies that are family-friendly, question assumptions and help to create a gender-sensitive work environment.

The Secretary-General has repeatedly stated his commitment to realizing gender balance in the Secretariat. He has shown leadership with the appointment of women leaders in key posts in the Secretariat. I certainly hope that more will be made. But we need to ensure that this commitment is turned into reality at all levels. That requires vigilance and commitment by all in the Secretariat, particularly by managers, as well as continued pressure from partners who wants to see the Organization become a true standard-bearer for gender equality. Thank you.

