

*ECOSOC Substantive Session of 2009*

*Statement by*

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*Agenda Item 7(e): Coordination, programme and other questions:  
Mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programmes in the United Nations  
system*

*Agenda Item 14 (a) Social and human rights questions:  
Advancement of Women*

*28 July 2009, Geneva*

Mr. President,  
Distinguished Delegates,  
Colleagues and Friends,

It is an honour for me to have this opportunity to address the Economic and Social Council on agenda item 7 (e), *Mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programmes in the United Nations system* and item 14 (a), *Advancement of women*.

**Mr. President,**

In the midst of a global financial crisis that threatens progress in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women, it is heartening that this session of the Council has clearly highlighted the particular challenges that women in various parts of the world continue to face, especially in their childbearing role. The call in the Ministerial Declaration of the High Level Segment, for all Member States to renew their commitment to preventing and eliminating child and maternal mortality and morbidity, and for health systems to be strengthened as a key component of an integrated approach to achieving rapid and substantial reduction in maternal morbidity and mortality, is timely. It indicates an unwavering commitment to ensuring that women do not continue to suffer because of the placement of gender equality as secondary to, rather than as a core element of, the overall development agenda. The Council's selection of "Implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to gender equality and empowerment of women" for next year's Annual Ministerial Review further highlights the centrality of gender equality and empowerment of women to the financial crisis and other competing demands.

**Mr. President,**

Under item 7(e), you have before you the Secretary-General's report on "Mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programmes in the United Nations system" (document E/2009/71). The report sets out the UN system's commitment to mainstream gender and outlines some of the efforts being undertaken towards that end. Ensuring that the staff have the requisite capacity to mainstream gender in all aspects of their work remains a preoccupation of the entities of the UN system. The Council's agreed conclusions 1997/2 on mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programmes in the United Nations system, as well as its subsequent resolutions on the issue, remain important guiding mandates for the current efforts. Working in collaboration with the UN System Staff College, the entities are bracing themselves to introduce mandatory training at all levels of the Organization. The preparation of a draft e-training module is underway and will be discussed by the entities in an Expert Group Meeting to be held this November. As the report indicates, in finalizing the module, entities must pay greater attention to the harmonization of approaches, as it holds the key to ensuring accountability within and across entities and is fundamental to system-wide coherence. The revised module is expected to be put into operation later this year.

The documents before you today and many others that were presented earlier, as well as the debates and discussions in the context of preparations for this session demonstrate the complex environment in which the efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment are taking place. However, despite these challenges, progress has been made.

**Mr. President,**

The Platform for Action remains relevant as the framework within which work on gender equality and women's empowerment at international, regional, sub-regional and national levels is being pursued. In this context, notable progress has occurred in narrowing the gender gap in access to basic education. An important area of success in the past 15 years is the strengthening of women's networks and alliances which continue to play a strong role in the development and implementation of gender sensitive policies and programmes, especially at the grassroots levels. A compelling sign of progress is the higher level of involvement of women in political decision making. Many more participate in the political process. Practically all regions of the world have now had a woman as a Head of State or Government.

The two reports you have before you also highlight some of these areas of progress, especially in the work of the United Nations. United Nations entities are making progress in gender mainstreaming also at the country level. Interagency collaboration has increased and progress has been made towards developing unified methodologies for measuring this progress. Above all, the United Nations system is undergoing a major review of how effectively it is positioned to play a lead and catalytic role in addressing gender quality and women's empowerment around the world. This review of the Organization's gender architecture is a bold and timely step with a primary objective to respond more effectively and readily to Member States' needs at the country level.

**Mr. President,**

This is also a time of significant challenges and uncertainties. It is expected that women and girls in both developed and developing countries will be mostly affected by job cuts and loss of livelihood as a result of the current financial crisis and economic meltdown. According to the ILO's Global Employment Trends for Women issued in March 2009, the number of unemployed women will rise to 22 million in 2009. The reduction in employment and income opportunities associated with the current economic crisis will lead to a considerable slowdown in progress towards poverty reduction and the fight against hunger. Women are likely to suffer disproportionately from these effects, which undoubtedly will detract from their progress towards equality and empowerment. The role of women as caregivers, especially in the contexts of HIV/AIDS also places them at greater risks of poverty in the context of the crisis. In the agreed conclusions of its 53<sup>rd</sup> session on the "Equal Sharing of Responsibilities Between Women and Men, Including Caregiving in the Context of HIV/AIDS", the Commission on the Status of Women noted that the gender inequalities which are reflected in imbalances of power between women and men in all spheres of society contribute to continuing imbalance and stereotyping in the division of labour between women and men.

With respect to global public health, the theme for this year's Annual Ministerial Review, participants at an interactive panel on "Gender Perspectives on Global Public Health: Implementing the Internationally Agreed Development Goals" agreed that gender inequality continues to reduce the potential for women worldwide to access quality health care. They stressed the importance of universal health coverage through primary health care to improve health for women and men. Women in the developing world are facing a public health crisis that is already claiming too many lives and will only worsen with the financial crisis unless urgent action is taken and the necessary investment is safeguarded. The link between violence against women and women's poor physical, mental and reproductive health remains a concern. Not only is poor access to reproductive health a cause of death and suffering for women, it also affects child health and survival and slows efforts to reduce poverty.

**Mr. President,**

The persistence of violence against women in all regions of the world detracts from the progress that has been made in other areas of gender equality. Violence against women has become an epidemic in our times and it requires the urgent attention of Member States and the entire development community. The Secretary-General has committed himself to this effort in his Campaign "UNiTE to end Violence against Women" and has called on Governments, the United Nations system and other stakeholders to partner with him in this effort to bring this scourge to an end. We must not forget that women's rights are human rights too and their achievement must be supported by appropriate national legislation to halt this scourge.

Sexual violence against women in situations of armed conflict continues to be a major challenge. The international community must mobilize against the practice of using women's bodies as battlefields. Instead women must be recognized as vital contributors to conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes. They must also be provided for in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes.

**Mr. President,**

With all these challenges and more, it is logical to ask if the commitment which united Governments at the beginning of the new millennium, leading to the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals will persevere against the stress and constraints of the global financial crisis and economic slowdown. Will the resolve with which Member States adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995 prevail over the obstacles and challenges that we confront today? Can the world still look forward to ending gender disparities in primary and secondary education; promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and reducing maternal mortality in line with the MDGs?

I am convinced that the answer to these questions is “Yes”; but only if we are guided by four basic criteria. If we are to make progress in our quest to achieve the goals of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the 2000 Millennium Summit, the 2005 World Summit and related commitments made at major United Nations conferences and summits, our efforts must be guided by the following:

- **Creativity**
- **Comprehensiveness**
- **Sustainability**, and
- **Commitment to innovation**

Let me leave you with some quick thoughts on each of these.

### **Creativity**

Creative approaches are needed to equip women with the tools to deal with today’s challenges and global crises. The Grameen Bank approach has inspired many, including commercial banking institutions, to find innovative ways to support long excluded groups such as poor women. Modern technology and new modes of communication have also provided us with new tools with which to promote development. Many offer opportunities for creative means of reaching women and girls who previously had limited or no access to information and services. The Innovation Fair which was held during the High-Level segment highlighted the breadth and scope of opportunities for communicating health messages and enhancing health services in a creative way through ICT tools. By making ICT tools as accessible to women and girls as they are to men and boys and applying local technologies to ensure wide access, costs would be minimized while gender barriers would also be overcome.

### **Comprehensiveness**

The challenge of ensuring gender equality and women’s empowerment is a complex one, and it needs a comprehensive approach. This means gender equality must be a specific consideration in every sector policy and programme. The link to the health agenda has been made clear in this session of the Council. The links to other sectors are equally compelling. The discussions of financing for development demonstrated clearly the interconnectedness between gender equality and women’s empowerment and sustainable social and economic development. Being comprehensive also requires giving due attention to building local capacities to ensure local ownership, especially for addressing issues such as violence against

women, often rooted in cultural traditions and social norms. Being comprehensive must also acknowledge and address a complex interplay of economic factors that sustain gender inequality.

### **Sustainability**

For programmes to achieve a lasting impact, they need to be sustainable. The design of programmes must be anchored in national ownership and must encompass resources and capacity for long-term sustainability. Where this has not happened, the results have been poor. In 1987, the global campaign to reduce maternal mortality was launched in a Safe Motherhood Conference in Nairobi, Kenya. More than 20 years and many large national action plans and programmes later, many of the challenges of maternal mortality still remain. An unacceptably high number of women remain at risk of death due to pregnancy or childbirth, especially in the developing countries. According to UNICEF, a woman dies from complications in childbirth every minute - the vast majority of them in developing countries. Thus interventions must reflect the needs of beneficiaries and resources would need to be made available locally in order to support local initiatives. We have learnt very clearly in the last 15 years of efforts in gender equality and women's empowerment that local initiatives, especially those led by civil society organizations have great potential to ensure sustainability.

### **Commitment to Innovation**

**Mr. President,**

Finally, we need to make a commitment to real change in our implementation efforts. The new and complex challenges we face today require flexibility and innovation and commitment to implementation of internationally agreed development goals. The United Nations has begun to make important changes in its institutional approach to development, especially by working as one UN. Thereby, the Organization aims to bring together initiatives of the system to make the Millennium Development goals a reality. This goal of the Organization, in conjunction with the pressing challenges in promoting gender equality, raise the current discussions in the General Assembly on the establishment of one strong entity for gender equality and women's empowerment, to an unprecedented level of urgency. One strong, focused gender entity, working as part of a One UN holds greater promise for the women of the world than any of the individual parts of the existing architecture. Member States' commitment to making a strengthened architecture a reality would send a strong message to all stakeholders and to the women of the world that the United Nations is truly willing to make this a successful push to bring gender equality and women's empowerment issues, at least at par with other areas of the global development agenda.

**Mr. President,**

My Office and the Division for the Advancement of Women, as well as the Inter-agency Network on Women and Gender Equality which I chair, pledge our full cooperation. We look forward to your guidance as we move forward with the work on the gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Thank you, Mr. President.