

Please check against delivery

SIXTY-FOURTH SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY
THIRD COMMITTEE
Introductory Statement
by
Ms. Rachel Mayanja
Assistant Secretary-General
Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women
12 October 2009

Mr. Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Colleagues and friends,

It is an honour for me to address the Third Committee this morning and to touch on a few issues related to gender equality and the Advancement of Women. I congratulate you, Mr. Chairperson, and other Bureau members on your election. I would also like to thank Ambassador Frank Majoor of the Netherlands and members of the outgoing bureau, for guiding the deliberations of this Committee during the 63rd session.

Mr. Chairperson,

When I addressed this Committee last year, I remarked that our discussion was taking place in the shadow of major threats including outbreaks of conflict and violence, projected global economic slowdown, the global financial, food and energy crises, likely increases in unemployment, natural disasters and emergencies and global warming. Several of the challenges which I then saw as shadows, are real today and are having a whirlwind of an effect on many aspects of development, with many implications for the wellbeing of women and girls.

Let me start with perhaps the most common area of attention – unemployment. The International Labour Organization estimates that as a result of the financial crisis, unemployment in 2009 could reach 6.1 to 7.0 per cent for men and 6.5 to 7.4 per cent for women, many of whom remain trapped in insecure and often unpaid jobs. Women especially those living in rural areas still account for the majority of the poor.

The financial crisis also threatens to reverse gains made with respect to women's health and survival. In developing countries, in particular, women and girls are likely to experience severe impact of the crisis as the delivery of essential social services – including maternal and reproductive health services is awaited. At the 2009 Annual Ministerial Review of ECOSOC held in Geneva this past July on "Implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to global public health", it was evident that despite years of commitment and investment, progress in improving global health had been mixed.

Mr. Chairperson,

Women and girls' health continues to face a number of threats that should have been attenuated or even eliminated in the last century. According to UNFPA, every minute, a woman dies of complications related to pregnancy and childbirth from mostly preventable and treatable medical problems, which adds up to more than 500,000 women each year. This is a great sacrifice by women on sustaining the human species.

We have been told repeatedly by health experts that many health problems among pregnant women are preventable, detectable or treatable through visits with trained health workers before birth. Yet, policies and programmes continue to fall far short of reaching this goal. The ability to respond is weakened by the global financial situation which threatens to compromise funding for programmes to improve maternal health. Since the 1990s most developing countries have seen major reductions in donor funding for family planning on a per woman basis. This is an unacceptable.

Efforts to reach women within their communities must be intensified. Interventions must go beyond simply providing services to providing education for prevention and early detection of possible obstetric complications. It is important to remove financial and other barriers to access.

Mr. Chairperson,

Much has been made of the progress that has been achieved in narrowing the gender gap in access to basic education. Indeed some significant gains in this area have been made. Even here, however, the Millennium Development Goal to eliminate such disparities in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 was missed. The Millennium Development Report for 2009 notes that ensuring that the opportunity is not lost again in 2015 will require renewed urgency and commitment.

HIV/AIDS remains a major challenge to the health and survival of women in many parts of the developing world. Women account for half the people living with HIV/AIDS worldwide. Nearly 60 per cent of those infected in sub-Saharan Africa are women. Gender inequities often underlie women's risk-taking behaviour, and vulnerability to HIV infection. Often that vulnerability is beyond a woman's individual control. Adolescent girls are at particular disadvantage.

Mr. Chairperson,

As is widely acknowledged, rape and sexual violence has become a weapon of war. In recent years, the Security Council has focused significant attention on combating this scourge. In addition to the landmark resolution 1325(2000) on women and peace and security, the Council has over the past year adopted three other resolutions –1820 (2008)

in July 2009, 1888 (2009) in September 2009 and 1889 (2009) in October 2009. With these new resolutions, the Security Council signaled its resolve to intensify actions to ensure that violence against women during armed conflict is eliminated.

Despite these and numerous specific efforts by Member States, the United Nations system and civil society to address it, gender-based violence in situations of armed conflict persists. While it is clear that the United Nations system and other partners have made progress in implementing resolution 1325(2000) and in particular by building the capacity to mainstream gender in all peace processes, including peacebuilding, peacekeeping, disarmament, demobilization and reconstruction and post-reconstruction, much more remains to be done. Warring factions blatantly disregard human rights laws and the development and implementation of legislation to hold violators of gender based violence accountable remain poor allowing perpetrators to escape.

Mr. Chairperson,

Other forms of violence against women also persist across all societies, traumatizing, maiming and killing women and girls and depriving them of their basic human rights. Such violence appears to be rooted in cultures that ignore it, condone it, or even promote it.

Mr. Chairperson,

Let me now turn to progress in some aspects of Goal 3 of the MDGs - a goal which encompasses many of the areas I have already touched upon. There has been notable progress in women's political empowerment and their role in decision making. Data suggests that in the last decade the number of women parliamentarians at the national level has increased by 8 per cent to a global average of 18.4 per cent. These are important achievements as it is known that when women assume decision-making positions, they are more likely than men to address issues of interest to women. This is evident, for example, in the cases of Liberia and Rwanda - 2 post conflict countries in which women have a greater say in government and are using this opportunity to promote the engagement of women in all sectors of public life.

Mr. Chairperson,

The 53rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women brought out a number of issues of concern related to the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men in caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS. For example, women around the world continue to bear a disproportionate share of care work in their households and communities. Unfortunately, although it is known that most caregiving work, especially in the household, is performed by women, the value and costs of such work remains largely unmeasured and its contribution to economic and social development has not been adequately recognized and valued in economic terms. The dimensions and effects of the gender imbalance in caregiving work have also not been adequately measured.

The unequal sharing of responsibilities between men and women reflects stereotypical assumptions about the role of women and men in society. Unequal sharing of responsibilities in the private and the public sphere has adverse impacts on women as well as men, their families, the economy and society as a whole. It has implications for equality of opportunity in education, in the labour market and in public life, including political participation, as well as for the quality of family relationships and care-giving. It is vital that as efforts are being made to forge ahead to address long term women's empowerment, the uneven yoke of domestic and caregiving responsibilities that women and girls bear must likewise be addressed.

But addressing the care burden on women will elude us unless we pay particular attention to protecting the environment and especially to climate change, to ensure that the domestic and caregiving chores that women and girls often bear do not become even more burdensome and outright dangerous.

In many communities around the world, women are the primary collectors of fuelwood and may spend as much as an estimated 300 hours a year collecting fuelwood. As fuelwood supplies decrease, women spend more time and efforts in the search, compromising their health in often hot and arid climates. Women's search for water will also become more difficult and prolonged with environmental degradation and climate change which is expected to exacerbate shortages of potable water worldwide, and have a profound impact on human health.

Mr. Chairperson,

What emerges from this eclectic overview of some key issues is the continued relevance of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. As we approach the 15th anniversary of the Declaration and Platform for Action, and during the reviews of its implementation that are underway, it is important to bear in mind that the issues raised then, especially the 12 critical areas of concern, remain critically relevant today.

While acknowledging that some progress has been made, the multiple outstanding challenges warrant our reflection on whether it is not time for a paradigm shift in our approach to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. This shift should bring greater attention to implementation with a sharper link between the normative work and the operational experiences on the ground. This shift also requires the breaking down and removal of silos and replacing them with a more integrated holistic approach that involves all stakeholders and beneficiaries – Member States, the United Nations system, civil society, and the private sector.

In that regard, the adoption by the General assembly of resolution A.RES/63/311 confirms the view that the current system for the implementation of policies and commitments on gender equality and empowerment of women is weak and inadequate to support Member States.

The United Nations system is therefore at the cusp of major change in how it addresses gender equality and women's empowerment around the world. The adoption of resolution A/RES/63/311 is an indication of the willingness and readiness of Member States to be agents of change to ensure the needed paradigm shift.

The Secretary-General has been solidly behind a strengthened system that would enable a better support of Member States in fulfillment of their commitments to women. He has emphasized that he will move expeditiously to respond to the resolution in order to bring the new gender entity into being as soon as possible.

Resolution A/RES/63/311 has been heralded by many around the globe and expectations are high, and justifiably so. Many women around the world continue to be excluded from the full benefits of social and economic development and many experience gender-based violence and other forms of abuse of their human rights.

Mr. Chairperson,

We look forward to your unwavering support as we work to prepare the proposals for the design of a new composite entity that would be better resourced, have stronger field presence and a greater capacity to serve the Member States and all the women of the world. We look to you for a swift decision. The achievement of this on the 15th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, would indeed be a fulfilling achievement and a reaffirmation that the ideals for which women's organizations, Member States, the United Nations system and the international community have toiled over the past decade and a half have indeed been worthwhile.

Thank you, Mr. Chairperson.
