



Address by Mr. Urmas PAET,

Minister of Foreign Affairs of Estonia

at the Economic and Social Council

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high-level segment

General Debate

**Implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard
to gender equality and empowerment of women**

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Mr. President,

Estonia aligns itself with the address made earlier by the European Union and would hereby like to make the following statement on behalf of Estonia.

In the run-up to the ten year review conference on progress made on the Millennium Development Goals, we are here to find ways to improve the status of women and girls, an essential element of this process.

Achieving gender equality is a challenge for all of us. The progress achieved in the last fifteen years is fragile. In the context of various crises, the advancements made on gender equality and women's rights are among the first to disappear. As a result of the financial crisis there is an increased rate of women's unemployment, malnutrition and hunger. Violence against women has increased. Maternal mortality remains high across much of the developing world. Despite the fact that women are among the most affected by the increasing number of environmental disasters, financing the mitigation of climate change has too rarely taken into account the gender perspective.

However, some progress has been made towards abolishing the gender inequality. A number of countries have managed to narrow down the gender gap in schools. Also, despite the challenging context, there have been some positive trends in the field of funding such as increased private funding for women's rights.

Funding, especially to innovative projects and programmes, can make a difference! The UN Trust Fund in Support of Action to Eliminate Violence against Women set a successful example when it helped bring together judges

from several African countries. The project raised awareness about an often unconscious gender bias in legal reasoning – a problem which often prevents gender equality laws being fully applied. Although the project has come to an end, the participants have continued manifesting the “jurisprudence of equality” in their respective courts after forming an association for this purpose.

Active political participation of women is essential for their voices to be heard. There are many examples of progress made in women’s political participation. For instance, in Rwanda the number of seats held by women in national parliament amounted to 52% in 2008. This is the highest proportion of women parliamentarians in the world and sets a challenging example to follow.

Mr. President,
Women’s concerns and experiences need to be taken into account in order to create just development. Yet gender issues are often neglected by decision-makers. One of the main ways in which gender equality, often with the support of the UNICEF, has entered parliamentary agendas is through the introduction of gender responsive budgeting. This ensures that economic policy takes into account the different circumstances women and men live in and that pledges for gender equality are actually backed with resources. A positive example in incorporating a gender perspective to budgeting has been set by the Timor-Leste Women Parliamentarians’ Caucus in cooperation with UNDP and UNIFEM as part of its efforts to advance gender equality.

Despite the profound effect conflicts have on the lives of women, I observe with regret that women continue to be excluded from nearly all peace processes. Without amending this gap building sustainable peace will be impossible.

In order to enable women to play an active role in development, it is of utmost importance to protect and promote the rights of women and create the necessary conditions for their involvement. That includes ensuring access to education and keeping girls in school. Education is one of the most powerful tools for empowering women. It is equally important to improve reproductive health, including access to sexual and reproductive health information and services, including family planning, as well as to increase women's control over productive and financial assets.

As the Secretary General noted in his speech at the World Economic Forum, our era demands a new constellation of international cooperation - governments, civil society and the private sector should work together. Much needed voices within the civil society that demand and monitor gender sensitive policies keep us all focused. In this regard I would like to draw your attention to the recent example where 300 women's, human rights and social justice groups around the world successfully campaigned for moving forward with the establishment of the new UN entity of gender equality. There are also thousands of active civil society participants every year at the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

Women AND men in leadership positions have the opportunity to make a huge difference by leading by example. A woman like Shirin Ebadi – an Iranian human rights activist and Nobel Prize winner – has provided inspiration to thousands. The media has also the potential to encourage women and weaken stereotypes, reflecting the role of women not solely as victims of poverty and violence, but as key players in economy and development. Terry Davies, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, has rightly pointed that *“a society that tolerates inequality is blocking its own social and economic progress. Like in football, you will not win if you only play with half of your team.”*

Mr. President,

I am pleased to note that the coherence and efficiency of the UN system is being actively considered with a view of pressing Millennium Development Goals deadlines and the stock-taking summit in September. It is of great satisfaction to Estonia that yesterday afternoon member states reached agreement on a resolution that will establish a new composite gender entity which will combine normative and operational activities. Estonia has been a financial contributor to UNIFEM and will provide support to the new Entity. We urge the Secretary-General to appoint a capable and visionary Head to the Entity without delay.

While the primary focus of the Millennium Development Goals is on developing countries, gender disparities still persist in all countries and should not be overlooked. Estonia remains committed to the principle of equality between women and men as a fundamental human right. This principle has its roots in our first constitution, dating from 1920. I am proud to say that just recently we celebrated 90 years of women's suffrage in Estonia.

Gender equality continues to be one of the priority areas of Estonia's activities in the field of human rights, as well as in development cooperation.

Estonia's contributions through UN programs and funds, including UNIFEM and UNFPA, as well as bilateral development assistance aim to support the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women. We have also bilaterally launched several development projects in Afghanistan dedicated to improving women's health. Our medical expert in Helmand Province has established a good relationship with local women, training them in midwifery and other first aid skills, helping to reduce maternal and newborn mortality. Estonia has also financed projects in Georgia aimed at eliminating gender based violence. This has included support to a psycho-social rehabilitation centre in

the war ravaged region of Abkhazia and capacity development to prevent and track domestic violence.

Estonia continues to actively advocate the incorporation of the gender dimension into all UN activities, so that our pledges for gender equality would become a reality.

Estonia continues to support the full and comprehensive implementation of the resolution 1325(2000) on “Women, Peace and Security”. It follows our realization that sustainable peace and development are not possible without the inclusion of women. To this end, Estonia is in the process of compiling a national action plan to implement resolution 1325. We also call for further efforts on women, peace and security at the regional and global levels.

We value highly the annual discussions between member states and civil society at the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), a functional body of ECOSOC providing policy guidance in gender equality and the empowerment of women. Estonia, as a first time member of the Commission from 2011, will continue to contribute to these deliberations.

Thank you, Mr. President