



ITALY

HIGH LEVEL SEGMENT OF THE
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL
GENERAL DEBATE

STATEMENT BY

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Mr Chairman, Excellencies, dear colleagues, distinguished delegates,

To be born a girl and to be a woman today, still means having fewer opportunities than men, in too many parts of the world. Facts and figures support this sad reality: we can read in newspapers, in documents, in statistical data, that women are poorer than men, their wages are lower and girls receive less education than boys.

It is also a fact that they are more likely to be victims of violence than men, and girls and women are more often exposed to the danger of human trafficking, as well as being subjected to female genital mutilation.

More than 15 years ago we adopted the Beijing Platform and since then, girls and women all over the world have made significant progress: more girls have access to education and more women are part of in the work-force and economic decision-making. At this regard, we would like to welcome the conclusion of the negotiations on the institution of a UN entity for gender equality and the empowerment of women. We believe that this can be a crucial step in promoting women's rights worldwide. We expect the Entity to be operational and effective as soon as possible.

It is also clear to everyone, that every single Millennium Development Goal is directly or indirectly linked to women's rights: this means that in societies where women are treated equally, there is much more opportunity to obtain the Development Goals by the year 2015.

On the contrary, societies in which women cannot enjoy the same rights as men, will not be able to produce that level of development in a sustainable way within the next five years. And we think it is very sad to observe that in many parts of the world today, there has been no progress towards reaching these Goals.

While, in some areas progress has been made; for example, as you know, this is the European Year for the fight against starvation and poverty and the promotion of social inclusion. With this in mind, many schemes giving women access to micro-credit have been introduced into national and international programmes.

In Italy, there are several initiatives that favour access to micro-credit and currently there are 29 projects that have set up special funds for families. This is also due to the activity of the 'Permanent National Italian Committee for Micro-Credit', established in response to the Resolution with which the General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed 2005 'International Year of Micro-Credit'. The Committee is expressly dedicated to spreading and promoting micro-credit, a useful instrument in the fight against starvation and the realisation of the Millennium Goals.

In more general terms, the commitment of Italy is concentrated on culminating the existing gaps and on widening the scope of opportunity for women in social, economical and productive contexts and within the Institutions. When considering policies of cohesion, the promotion of gender equality opportunities must be considered a priority for the fulfilment of the Millennium Goals.

Italy is firmly convinced that by extending essential services and by strengthening health care structures to protect girls and women, we can speed up such progress.

Italy also believes that female education is one of the most powerful means of establishing a supportive environment to protect the health of the mother and the new-born child. The universal diffusion of primary education could be a means of preventing 700.000 cases of HIV each year, about 30 per cent of new infections are contracted in this age group.

We must do even more to reduce maternal-infant mortality. Every year more than half a million women die during pregnancy or during childbirth; this means that every minute a woman dies. Almost 11 million children under five years of age die every year, more than 1.200 every hour, due to diseases that could be prevented.

Italy is also firmly convinced that the key to achieve the Millennium Goals and in particular Objective n°3 concerning gender equality, consists in the redistribution of power, of health care services and of work.

During the second year of Government, the Ministry for Equal Opportunities has concentrated its efforts and used its own financial resources to establish more stable conditions for the realisation of full equality between men and women in the work place.

Firstly, we have taken measures that strengthen services in favour of working mothers and families, and secondly we have introduced new and important laws that impose severe sanctions for those employers who discriminate in the work place.

We have given special protection to the period of maternity, also dedicating our attention to fathers who can now take advantage of parental leave. We have also ruled that a worker of either sex who goes abroad for an international adoption cannot be dismissed. Women like men can see their opportunity to retire at 65 legally recognized, while so-called 'indirect discrimination' that impedes the rise of women to top positions in the work place is severely punished.

Together with other Ministries, we are putting into practice an integrated social plan which is aimed at making life easier for families and working mothers. It foresees the opening of new nurseries and the training of staff to look after the elderly, the weak and the disabled.

It is also important to combat violence against women in every form, domestic violence, violence in the work place and even on the street. Physical and mental abuse is always a great violation of human rights, and it is even more intolerable when it is used as an instrument of war.

Mr Chairman,

there is also another aspect that we must not disregard, if we neglect the importance of empowering women and we forget the rights of young girls, we risk weakening our countries' growth because gender inequality represents a cost for our national economies. Let us remember that progress in the fields of Education, Health care and the fight against violence, will give woman the opportunity to enjoy real economical rights.

This is the reason why every country must do its utmost to ensure that each human being has the opportunity to lead a better life.

Thank you all for your kind attention