



The World Bank

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Improving Women's Lives: A Forward-Looking Assessment

Statement delivered by

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Madame Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates, Colleagues,

Thank you for giving the World Bank the opportunity to address the Commission on the Status of Women. We appreciate the leadership provided by the Commission in promoting the advancement of gender equality and its commitment to ensuring that the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action remains an integral element of all development activities and goals.

The World Bank's presence here is driven by a desire to improve the effectiveness and ability of our assistance to client countries through continued interaction with our partners, clear and prioritized goals, and the resolve to achieve them. We believe that linking the implementation of the Beijing Platform and the Millennium Development Goals is the most effective manner to build on our momentum because this linkage holds the promise of bringing together the economic, social and gender agendas into one coherent development framework.

When the World Bank's president, Mr. Wolfensohn, addressed the gathering of delegates in Beijing in 1995, he noted, and I quote, "A start has been made: gender gaps in education and health, while still unacceptable, are narrowing; women are entering the job market at twice the rate of men; on a global scale, women's organizations are playing an increasing role in development – both at the national and international level, and as we have seen at this conference, women have assumed important leadership and policy making roles in many countries." Our ten-year review of Beijing: *Improving Women's Lives: World Bank Action Since Beijing*, notes that these trends have continued.

In 1995, Mr. Wolfensohn also noted that many challenges and obstacles remained. Soon thereafter, the World Bank was challenged to improve our performance, to increase our lending for programs that reduce gender inequalities, and to systematically incorporate gender perspectives in every aspect of our work.

Madame chairperson, we heard those messages from Beijing, and we continue to be guided by them. We commissioned a study that marshaled the evidence to show that development is impeded when women lack equal access to rights, resources and voice. It demonstrated convincingly how gender inequality is a barrier to development. It slows economic growth and lowers a country's ability to reduce poverty effectively. Our Executive Board endorsed a gender mainstreaming strategy to incorporate those findings into our country-level work.

We are investing in country level activities to counter the negative effects of gender roles, relations and policies on women's opportunities and rights. We are working with governments to review legal systems that discriminate against women by restricting their access to and control over productive resources, constraining the conditions of their employment, limiting their freedom of mobility, failing to protect their personal safety or reproductive rights, or marginalizing their rights to participate in decision making.

We are increasing our attention to the investment climate and the impacts of financial and regulatory reforms because these issues affect women's ability to participate more effectively as entrepreneurs, employers and employees. Our sister agency, the IFC, has launched an innovative program to foster gender equality in entrepreneurship and markets (GEM).

Distinguished delegates, as we work toward fully realizing the Beijing Platform goals, we also are trying to address new and emerging concerns that are slowing down women's advancement. Chief among these challenges is the feminization of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The inability of women to protect themselves against contracting the disease in those societies ravaged by HIV/AIDS reflects their lack of economic power and limited voice. Gender-based violence is another acknowledged challenge. In 2004, the Bank convened its first conference on gender-based violence. Following this conference, Mr. Wolfensohn called on our partners to fight this complex global phenomenon, because we cannot afford the significant economic, social, and human burdens it imposes on women, men, and children.

While we have made substantial progress by working together, challenges still remain. Therefore, it is important to look ahead to determine what strategies, actions and alliances will accelerate progress toward our goals and provide the greatest impact. In prioritizing our areas of focus for the future, we are relying on a few key lessons from the past:

- First, gender equality matters in every aspect of our work. It matters in education and health, and it matters in sectors where the linkages to gender equality may not be as obvious. We should continue to undertake rigorous gender analysis and research to improve our understanding of the social and economic implications of gender inequalities in a range of policy areas, including trade reform, labor markets, and public expenditures.
- Second, the findings and recommendations of such gender analysis must become integral parts of policy dialogues at the highest decision-making levels – and with civil society and donor partners at the country level. Otherwise, we will fail to prioritize important gender issues, especially in the constrained policy environments of limited resources and competing priorities.
- Third, we must build a community of practitioners within the Bank and in client countries, who have both the political will, **and** the technical capacity to mainstream gender issues at policy and technical levels.
- Fourth, improving gender equality is a global agenda – not a women's only agenda. Unless both women and men change their views on gender equality, and work in partnership to achieve it, we will not make progress. With renewed resolve, we will leverage the talents of women and men to improve women's lives and the lives of communities around the world.
- Fifth, we need gender-sensitive indicators to measure progress towards equality, especially in areas such as property rights, employment, and the prevalence of violence. Through our partnerships, we are helping to develop indicators to measure progress in achieving all the MDGs, not only the third goal.

- And finally, we need to expand our partnerships for gender equality – first and foremost with our client countries, but also with the UN, OECD, donors at the country level, and other multilateral development banks.

Simultaneous developments on the global development agenda have assisted us in setting our course forward. The comprehensive approach to development in low-income countries in their preparation of poverty reduction strategies, and the MDGs provide interlinked frameworks for the Bank's assistance to client countries. The MDGs highlight the synergies with the Beijing Platform for Action. They give concrete benchmarks and a timeline within which to achieve key aspects of the Beijing Platform's critical areas of concern. In the MDGs, we have a road map, we have milestones. We know how far we need to go – we need to take immediate action to improve women's economic advancement through improved access to productive resources, enforceable rights, and decision making voice if we are to meet the 2015 targets. The MDGs and the Beijing Platform enable us to work more holistically across sectors with gender equality as a driving force.

Madame Chairperson, distinguished delegates, we acknowledge that no single institution has definitive answers, and no single approach can solve the multi-dimensional problems of gender inequality. We look forward to continuing to work in partnership with the international development community to improve women's and girls' lives, and through that, the lives of communities around the world.

Thank you.