

**Interactive dialogue**

**“Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels”**

**6 March 2009, 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.**

**ISSUES PAPER**

**I. Introduction**

The Commission on the Status of Women, at its fifty-third session (2 – 13 March 2009), will evaluate progress in the implementation at national level of the agreed conclusions on “Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels”, adopted by the Commission at its fiftieth session in 2006, through an interactive dialogue among Member States and observers. This review is designed to identify achievements, lessons learned, gaps and challenges encountered. It is expected that the dialogue will highlight good practices and strategies for further and accelerated implementation of the agreed conclusions.

**II. Background**

Over the past three decades, significant commitments to women’s participation in decision-making have been made at the international level. The full participation of women in decision-making processes has been recognized as a human rights issue and as a critical element for the achievement of gender equality in international human rights conventions and global policy frameworks. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women called upon States Parties to take all appropriate measures, including temporary special measures, to eliminate discrimination against women in all areas, including political and public life in the country.

The Beijing Platform for Action defined two strategic objectives in the area of women in power and decision-making: to ensure women’s equal access to and full participation in power structures and to increase women’s capacity to participate in decision-making. The Beijing Platform for Action noted that women’s equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women’s interests and rights to be taken into account (paragraph 181). The Platform highlighted the importance of gender balance in governmental bodies, public administration and within the United Nations. Governments agreed to establish targets and measures to substantially increase the number of women and recognized that shared work and parental responsibilities of women and men promote women’s increased participation in public life (paragraph 190a). The Platform also called on Governments, private sector, and civil society to review the criteria for recruitment and appointment to advisory and decision-making bodies (paragraph 192c).

In its resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security, the Security Council reaffirmed the importance of the equal participation and full involvement of women in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, as well as the need to increase their role in decision-making.

In the 2005 World Summit Outcome, Member States reaffirmed that progress for women was progress for all and resolved to promote gender equality and eliminate pervasive gender discrimination by, inter alia, promoting increased representation of women in Government

decision-making bodies, including through ensuring their equal opportunity to participate fully in the political process.

The 2006 Commission on the Status of Women's agreed conclusions on "Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels" expressed concern about the lack, at the local, national, regional and international levels, of sufficient information and data disaggregated by sex on the participation of women and men in decision-making processes in all areas, and called on the relevant entities of the United Nations system, other international and regional organizations, including the international financial institutions, national parliaments, political parties, civil society, including the private sector, trade unions, academia, the media, non-governmental organizations and other actors to take a series of actions to improve the participation of women in decision-making, including the following (paragraph 17):

- Review, as appropriate, existing legislation, including electoral law, and remove or modify, as appropriate, provisions that hinder women's equal participation in decision-making, and adopt positive actions and temporary special measures, as appropriate, to enhance women's equal participation in decision-making processes at all levels;
- Establish concrete goals, targets and benchmarks for achieving equal participation of women and men in decision-making bodies at all levels and in all areas, especially in areas of macroeconomic policy, trade, labour, budgets, defense and foreign affairs, the media and the judiciary;
- Develop and fund policies and programmes, including innovative measures, to build a critical mass of women leaders, executives and managers, with the goal of achieving a gender balance at all levels and in all areas, in particular in strategic economic, social and political decision-making positions;
- Establish the goal of gender balance in decision-making in administration and public appointments at all levels, develop alternative approaches and changes in institutional structures and practices, including the development of gender action plans;
- Ensure women's full and equal participation and representation at all decision-making levels in all aspects of peace processes and in post-conflict peacebuilding, reconstruction, rehabilitation and reconciliation processes;
- Encourage greater involvement of all marginalized women in decision-making at all levels and address and counter the barriers faced by marginalized women in accessing and participating in politics and decision-making; and
- Ensure that gender perspectives are incorporated in development policies and programmes, and in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, to ensure that women and all other members of society benefit from development and that women are empowered to assume leadership positions.

Women's political participation and participation in decision-making bodies at executive and legislative levels has grown, albeit slowly. In national parliaments, women accounted for 13.5 per cent of members in 2000, compared to a global average of 18.4 per cent as of 30 November 2008. In September 2008, women in Rwanda secured 45 out of 80 seats (56.2 per cent), making the Rwandan parliament the first in the world to have women in the majority. Twenty four countries have achieved over 30 per cent representation of women in parliament in 2008, with Rwanda, Sweden, Cuba, Finland, the Netherlands and Argentina at the top of the list.<sup>1</sup>

The growing participation of women in decision-making processes has important impacts on policy outcomes. Women legislators, for example, have promoted equality and non-

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<sup>1</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

discrimination, gender-sensitive and family friendly legislation and policies on issues such as equal pay for equal work, maternity and parental leave, social security, and access to health care. Women have also been instrumental in the development of gender-responsive budgeting, which aims to ensure that government budgets and allocations, and the policies and programmes that underlie them, address the different priorities and needs of women and men. In many countries, women's presence in the political arena and in decision-making positions has been critical in combating violence against women.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the broad recognition of the critical role of women in leadership positions, in both developing and developed countries, women continue to be under-represented in decision-making and leadership. For example with regard to the judiciary, as of 2003, there were four women out 15 justices (26 per cent) of the Supreme Court in the Philippines. In Israel, women comprise 41 per cent of the Supreme Court. In Nigeria, the first female judge of the Supreme Court was appointed just in 2005.<sup>3</sup>

In the private sector, very few women lead large companies or corporations, including multinational and transnational corporations and banks. Research shows that although women now occupy more than 40 per cent of all managerial positions in the United States, their participation among chief executives remains very limited. From the group of the most highly paid executives of *Fortune* 500 companies—those with titles such as chairman, president, chief executive officer, and chief operating officer— only six per cent are women; and only 15 per cent of the seats on the boards of directors are held by women.<sup>4</sup>

In the European Union the situation is similar, with women representing about 11 per cent of the top executives and four per cent of the CEOs and heads of boards of the 50 largest publicly traded corporations in each country. The governors of the central banks of all twenty-seven EU Member States are men. On average, there are five men for every woman on the highest decision-making bodies of EU central banks. In seven EU Member States (Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Portugal, and Slovenia) and in Turkey, the highest decision-making body of the central bank is comprised solely of men.

Norway has taken an innovative approach to ensure an increase of women's representation on boards. In December 2003, the Norwegian parliament adopted legislation requiring that at least 40 per cent of the board members of all state owned companies and privately owned public limited companies be women. In April 2003, only 7.3 per cent of the board members were women. By February 2008, 39 per cent of the board representatives in public limited companies were women.<sup>5</sup>

Overall, the commitments on gender equality in decision-making in all areas have not yet been met. As a consequence of this gender gap, women do not participate fully in decisions that shape their lives; and communities and countries do not capitalize on the full potential of one half of their societies. Some of the principal obstacles include the prevalence of gender stereotypes and traditional values, violence against women, women's lack of self-confidence, the prevalence of masculine models at the senior-level of decision-making, the lack of support within

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<sup>2</sup> Ravinovich (2005). *Women for a change*. London, United Kingdom: One World Action. See also UNIFEM (2008). Progress of the World 2008-2009: Who answers to women? Gender and accountability. New York: United Nations Development Fund for Women.

<sup>3</sup> CEDAW//C/PHI/5-6, CEDAW/C/ISR/4, CEDAW /C/NGA/6, 5 October 2006

<sup>4</sup> Catalyst 2008 Census of the Fortune 500 Reveals Women Gained Little Ground Advancing to Business Leadership Positions. Press Release, New York: Catalyst Inc. (Headquarters), (December 10, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Children and Equality, Norway.

constituencies, weak relationship with women's organizations, the inadequate access to high-level networks, and the poor implementation of temporary special measures. Other obstacles that prevent women to fully participate at the political processes are the nature of the political system, including the electoral systems, and the lack of access to financial resources and training for women candidates.<sup>6</sup> Women's participation in decision-making is also restricted by persistent poverty, women's unequal access to health, education, training and employment, and unpaid and domestic work. Armed conflict, lack of security and natural disasters are also factors that inhibit the ability of women to operate in the public life.

### **III. Format of the interactive dialogue**

The interactive dialogue will be introduced by two keynote speakers who will make presentations of seven to ten minutes. Member States, entities of the United Nations system and non-governmental organizations will participate in the ensuing dialogue, and are encouraged to share their experiences in implementing the agreed conclusions on "Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels", highlighting achievements, gaps and challenges, as well as good practices and lessons learned. Interventions from the floor will be limited to three minutes. A Chairperson's summary of the interactive dialogue will be prepared.

### **IV. Issues for consideration**

The dialogue will focus on the areas identified in the agreed conclusions adopted by the Commission in 2006.

The following questions provide a non-exhaustive discussion guide:

- What quantitative data and qualitative analysis are available on the extent to which women are represented in high-level positions (in the private sector, parliaments, academia, the media, the judiciary and other areas)?
- What structural factors influence the levels of representation of women (such as the educational system, quotas in corporate by-laws or transparent hiring or promotion processes)?
- Which institutional policies help improve representation of women at senior-levels of decision making? What examples of effective programmes, strategies, good practices for promoting women's leadership in different areas can be provided?
- What role do human resources offices play in helping women develop their capacities and reach senior positions?
- What is the impact of women in leadership positions for example on governance, gender equality outcomes, and other issues?
- What are good practice examples of men's roles in facilitating women's access to leadership positions including for example mentoring programmes?

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<sup>6</sup> Rabinovich (2005) op cit.