

**Opening Address by Carolyn Hannan
Director, Division for the Advancement of Women**

At the parallel event on “Empowering women through physical activity and sport”

**Organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women
in collaboration with
International Working Group on Women and Sport and
WomenSport International
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It is my pleasure to welcome participants to this event on empowering women through physical activity and sport. We are delighted to have so many stakeholders in the area of women and sport present to share their experiences with us today, in follow-up to launch last year of the United Nations publication: “*Women 2000 and Beyond: Women, gender equality and sport.*”

I want to express my appreciation for the collaboration the Division has had with both the International Working Group on Women and Sport and WomenSport International. I am particularly grateful for Johanna Adriaanse for agreeing to moderate this event. I also welcome back two prominent members of these groups, Carole Ogelsby and Kari Fasting.

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Sport and physical activity for women and girls is firmly on the United Nations agenda. Already as early as 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action called for accessible recreational and sport facilities in the education system, the workplace and in communities as well as gender-sensitive programmes.

Articles 10 and 13 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) call for States Parties to ensure the same opportunities for women and men to participate actively in sports, physical education and recreational activities.

The issue of women, gender equality and sport is important for the United Nations. Over the past decade, there has been a growing understanding that sport can be used to promote important development goals in the areas of health, education and employment, as well as democratic principles, leadership, tolerance and respect and social inclusion.

The United Nations International Year for Sport and Physical Education in 2005 highlighted the power of sport to allow individuals to experience equality, freedom and empowerment, noting that “*the control over one’s body experienced while practicing sport is particularly valuable for girls and women...*”

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The publication “*Women 2000 and Beyond: Women, gender equality and sport*” highlights that sport provides a myriad of benefits for women and girls and can be a powerful tool for women’s empowerment and gender equality. Sport promotes physical and mental well-being and offers opportunities for developing self-knowledge and self esteem, as well as

for demonstrating ability, skills acquisition and personal achievement, through a process of social interaction.

Sport and physical activity is critical for girls. Through sport, girls acquire new interpersonal networks and access to new opportunities. They develop skills in communication, teamwork, leadership and negotiation. The skills and values learned through sport are especially important given that in many countries adolescent girls have fewer opportunities than boys for social interaction outside the home and beyond family networks.

Because sport was traditionally perceived as a male domain, women's and girls' participation in sport also challenges gender stereotypes, and has potential for reducing discrimination and breaking down entrenched attitudes. Girls' participation can also have a significant impact on the attitudes of boys and young men towards gender equality.

Sporting events and arenas have been effectively used to get important information to women and girls on their reproductive rights and health and on HIV/AIDS. Sport has also been an effective channel for information to men and boys on gender equality, including on equitable sexual relations and on the eradication of violence against women.

The publication illustrates that women's increased involvement can also promote positive development in sport - through providing alternative values and attitudes, knowledge, experiences and capabilities. Women's increased participation in decision-making in sport diversifies the talent pool among coaches and managers, administrators, and other officials. Increased numbers of women in key positions can provide positive role models and mentors for girls in sport.

The publication also looks at the areas where equality between women and men needs to be strengthened, including participation in activities and bodies and in access to decision-making and resources and incentives. It also raises the issue of harassment and violence in sport and discusses the role of the media.

Generally women have fewer opportunities to participate in and benefit from sporting activities than men. Women and girls do not have access to the full range of activities available to men and boys and do not participate in management and leadership roles to the same extent as men and boys.

It is important, however, to also acknowledge that women's and girls' access to and participation in sports has increased over the last few decades. Many important barriers have been broken down and doors have been opened, largely through the persistent efforts of women and girls themselves.

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At the launch of the publication during the CSW last year, a number of important findings and recommendations were discussed. Participants stressed the need to broadly disseminate the publication and to develop shorter factsheets in different languages, based on the findings in the publication. The importance of bringing the findings to the governing bodies of sports organizations at both international and regional levels was noted. It was also felt that the findings should be brought to the attention of organizations outside the sporting arena - to increase awareness of the importance of sport and physical activity for women's empowerment and gender equality. Participants raised the Olympic Games in Beijing last

summer as one important forum for dissemination. It would be interesting to know the extent to which any of these recommendations has been followed up in the sporting world.

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Let me also raise a challenge at this meeting. The United Nations Secretary-General has launched a multi-year campaign to eradicate violence against women: “UNiTE to end violence against women” which will run until 2015, to coincide with the target-date for the MDGs. The Secretary-General has called on all stakeholders to work with him in achieving this critical mission – through increasing global advocacy, strengthening the work at national level, and through the United Nations leading by example. Stakeholders are encouraged to find ways to make visible contributions to the campaign. Violence against women is an important issue in the sporting arena. It would be important to find ways to make a significant contribution to the Secretary-General’s campaign.

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Let me close by highlighting the need to strengthen awareness of the importance of sport and physical activity for women and girls. Low levels of awareness and interest lead to gender inequality in terms of investments in facilities, resources, opportunities, attention in the media and distribution of incentives and rewards. This, in turn, lessens the interest of women and girls to be involved in sports and physical activity. It is important to break this negative cycle through increased awareness, political commitment, significantly increased investment of resources, and development of accountability mechanisms for all actors in key positions in the world of sport. This requires inputs from strong women leaders in the sporting world, a number of whom are present here today.

I am sure the discussions will be very interesting and provide a good basis for acting on the findings and recommendations of the publication.

Thank you