

UNITAR Course on UN Reform
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Session on:
Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women: Composite Entity
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1. Rationale for reform

It is a great pleasure to have the opportunity to make a presentation on this important topic. I would like to set the stage by providing a brief overview of the rationale for reform of the institutional arrangements for gender equality in the United Nations (or as it is more popularly known – reform of the gender equality architecture).

a) Progress on norm-setting and policy development

Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, I would like to start by focusing on that the United Nations has done well on gender equality. I believe it is very important to keep in mind that significant progress has been made by the United Nations on gender equality and empowerment of women since its establishment in 1945. In the context of on-going discussions, it is easy to forget to acknowledge the many important accomplishments that have been made. This is not constructive since the UN reform process must both identify and address gaps and challenges and recognized and build on progress and achievements.

The United Nations showed strong global leadership on this issue, including already immediately after its establishment by setting up the Commission on the Status of Women. It played a critical role in increasing the momentum in 1975 with the International Year of Women, the Decade on Women and the four world conferences held between 1975 and 1995. It is hard to imagine where we would stand on gender equality today if it had not been for the UN's efforts and in particular the work of the Commission on the Status of Women and the four world conferences and their follow-up processes.

Another critical milestone was the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on 1979 which has now been ratified by 186 Member States, and has an Optional Protocol. The Convention provides a unique and effective monitoring instrument. The Fourth World Conference in 1995 provided the global policy framework – the Beijing Platform for Action – which is still – nearly 15 years later - highly relevant and guides the work on gender equality and empowerment of women at global, regional and national levels.

An important watershed was the adoption of the gender mainstreaming strategy by Member States at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 and the adoption of the agreed conclusions on gender mainstreaming in ECOSOC in 1997. While implementation of the strategy is far from satisfactory, it has resulted in significant changes in the work on gender equality in both the United Nations itself and in Member States. One clear

illustration of progress is that gender equality and empowerment of women is no longer seen as the sole prerogative or responsibility of the four gender-specific entities working solely on gender equality – OSAGI (Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Equality and Advancement of Women), DAW (Division for the Advancement of Women), UNIFEM (United Nations Fund for Women), INSTRAW (International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women) but is recognized as an important responsibility of all parts of the UN system, within their specific mandates.

Similarly, in the intergovernmental context, while the Commission on the Status of Women is recognized as an important player, the critical roles of other bodies are also acknowledged - such as ECOSOC on gender mainstreaming; the third Committee of the GA on women's human rights and violence against women; the second committee of the GA on women's economic empowerment; and the Security Council on women, peace and security. Increasingly, intergovernmental bodies and entities of the UN system recognize and act on the gender equality implications of their specific mandates.

The fact that we have the global policy and legislative frameworks and that gender equality perspectives are taken up in many other intergovernmental contexts does not mean that that everything has been done at the normative and policy level. A number of substantial advances have been made but huge gaps remain in intergovernmental processes. In the past decade, significant progress has been made on two critical areas – *violence against women* and *women, peace and security*. These issues are given considerably more policy attention today than was possible in 1995. Nonetheless, there are serious remaining policy-gaps that need to be addressed and implementation at national level has to be accelerated.

There are other areas where more work is needed at both normative and policy level and in terms of implementation on the ground, for example on *women's economic empowerment* and *women's participation in decision-making*. It is, for example, far from acceptable that – more than 60 years after the establishment of the UN, only 18 percent of parliamentarians globally are women, and that women are concentrated in vulnerable forms of employment, face occupational segregation and wage-gaps, and lack access to formal financial services.

Discussion of the critical gender equality issues on the UN agenda brings me to the role of the NGOs in this work. Throughout the history of the UN, NGOs have played a very important role - bringing issues to the UN agenda, providing new perspectives and insights, linking discussions to realities on the ground, bringing dynamism to debates, and monitoring progress and ensuring accountability at national level. NGOs were instrumental in getting the increased attention in the UN to *violence against women* and have been very active in the area of *women, peace and security*. They have been actively involved in discussions on the reform of the gender equality architecture and will remain a critical partner in the future.

b) More limited success with implementation

It is somewhat more sobering to contemplate the progress made in implementation of the legislative and policy frameworks – CEDAW and the Platform for Action – at national level. Despite considerable efforts by UNIFEM and many other entities of the UN system, the UN has not always had the human and financial resources needed to provide the level and quality of support needed at national level. I am sure Mr Doraid from UNIFEM will provide more specific details on the work of UNIFEM and the constraints faced at operational level.

UN entities and Member States have long pointed to the gaps between the advances made at normative and policy levels and the efforts and outcomes at national level. Member States have consistently called for a strengthening of the UN support at country level. Full implementation of gender mainstreaming requires significantly increased commitment, attention and resources

Accelerating progress on gender equality and empowerment of women in the UN requires not just strengthening the four entities focused specifically on gender equality – OSAGI, DAW, UNIFEM and INSTRAW. Gender mainstreaming requires that all parts of the UN system identify and address gender equality aspects of their specific mandates. Efforts are needed to ensure that all entities systematically and effectively identify and address gender equality aspects of their work.

The need for strengthening of the central gender equality functions has become very apparent. The UN lacks strong, high-level leadership on gender equality and empowerment of women, with a resulting lack of coherence and coordination and ineffective use of scarce human and financial resources. All parts of the UN system can only fulfil their roles effectively if they are provided with leadership, guidance and support and if their efforts are systematically and effectively monitored and followed up at national level. A strong central entity – with leadership at USG level – is critical to ensure that there is policy coherence; that critical outcomes of intergovernmental processes are disseminated and followed-up; that adequate guidance and support is provided, including on gender mainstreaming; and that there is adequate monitoring and reporting of progress on the ground.

The four existing, separate and very under-resourced, entities cannot adequately play this role. For this reason the proposal for a composite entity has been put forward – to bring together the expertise, experience, knowledge and capacity of the four entities – and increase the potential of the UN to fulfil the important goals on gender equality and empowerment of women.

2. The reform process

The goal of the reform process is to strengthen the work of the UN on gender equality and empowerment of women – through creating one central gender equality body with sufficient leadership, vision, authority and visibility to have a significant impact on the work of the whole organization and its Member States. The new entity is expected to improve policy outcomes and ensure more effective impact of these outcomes on work at national level and to substantially increase the support provided to Member States to accelerate progress in implementation, and feedback the experiences, lessons learned and

promising practices from national level to intergovernmental processes, completing the circle.

In the ongoing intergovernmental process on the reform of the gender equality architecture, Member States have come to some important agreements - on the objectives that need to be achieved and on the constraints which must be addressed. There is also agreement on the functions required of a new entity, as well as consensus on the composite model as the most appropriate model for meeting the objectives, fulfilling the desired functions and addressing the identified constraints. What is required now is a decision to move forward with a clear mandate for the Secretary-General to act.

3. The way forward

We are hopefully nearing the end of a long intergovernmental process which has actively engaged Member States from all regions, as well as UN entities and NGOs, and has caught the attention of the entire world. Over the past two years, a series of reports have been provided by the Secretary-General at the request of Member States. Currently a resolution on System-wide coherence is being discussed in anticipation of its adoption on 14 September. Since Mr. Doraid and Ms. Sepag will provide inputs on the intergovernmental process, I will not dwell on this. I would like to end by providing some thoughts, from my experience and perspective, on what is important to keep in mind as we move forward in the reform process – in the context of the intergovernmental process and beyond.

- Firstly, reform of the gender equality architecture cannot be resource-neutral. One of the important findings - which was apparent from the earliest stage of the discussion - has been that gender equality does not receive adequate resources in the UN context. Simply combining the four entities into one composite entity, even with a USG as the head, without increasing resources will not bring about change. It could in fact be counterproductive, since expectations will have been significantly raised but the potential for strengthened work with positive outcomes would be very limited. Considerable new resources will be needed, most of which, however, can be provided through extra-budgetary funds.
- Secondly, the efforts to strengthen a central body should not detract attention from the critical role of the rest of the system and from the full implementation of the gender mainstreaming strategy. The composite entity should be seen as a catalyst and support for gender mainstreaming for the entire UN system. The relationship between the central entity and the whole UN system, including country level, in this respect must be made very clear.
- The focus should be on increasing the focus on work at country level – ensuring the link to the normative and policy work and significantly increasing resources and activities in support of Member States efforts. As the Director of DAW, I have a particular interest in seeing how, for example, the outcomes of the Commission on the Status of Women can have a more substantial impact on the work of the UN at country level. Member States make significant efforts in the Commission and the excellent outcomes – for example in recent years on the *girl child, financing for*

gender equality, and equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men - often do not get picked up and effectively utilized in country-level work. As these outcomes are implemented on the ground, the experiences, lessons learned and promising practices need to be feed back into the Commission. Strengthening the link between the policy and operational work – closing the circle - will strengthen the role of the UN generally, and its role on gender equality and empowerment of women in particular.

- A lot of attention has been given to potential duplication of effort. It is important to distinguish between duplication and lack of coordination. At national level the problem is often not so much duplication – since the supply usually does not come anywhere near to meeting the demand. What can be significantly improved is coordination at country level to increase coherence and ensure the most effective use of scarce resources. It is also important to keep in mind the significant gaps – areas where the UN is providing little or no support and to find ways to address these.

- [Discussion of duplication at times also negates the importance of gender mainstreaming – which is not constructive. Gender mainstreaming in relation to *violence against women*, for example, requires that all entities identify the relevant violence against women implications of their specific mandates and find ways to address them. The fact that WHO, UNHabitat, ILO, and FAO are addressing violence against women in the same country does not necessarily mean duplication since they are responding in the context of their own particular mandates – WHO on health, UNHabitat on human settlements, ILO on the labour market and FAO on rural development. There are relevant violence against women implications in all these areas and all these entities should be actively involved. What is needed, however, is significantly improved coordination and collaboration to ensure coherence and effective use of resources and improved support to the efforts of Member States.]

It is my hope that, by the end of this General Assembly, we will have a positive decision and will be able to move forward. A clear mandate is essential for the whole work programme of the UN because of the critical importance of gender equality for all three pillars of the UN – development, human rights and peace and security.

Thank you.