

8 March 2009

**Statement of Mr. Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann,
President of the 63rd Session of the General Assembly,
on International Women's Day**

The economic turmoil and ominous social unrest that are rippling through the world today inevitably affect the poor and vulnerable the hardest. Unfortunately, we can expect the harsh impact on women and girls will also escalate disproportionately in the months ahead. For this reason, I welcome the focus on uniting both men and women to prevent violence against women as the theme of International Women's Day. Sometimes it takes a crisis to raise awareness and mobilize new partnerships. We must seize every opportunity to ensure the advancement of women, in good times and bad.

During the last six decades, the UN has played a central role in achieving progress in the field of gender equality, in particular, by establishing an internationally agreed policy framework that guides the efforts of governments and other actors. We are proud of this work and the diversity of UN programmes that have contributed to the advancement of women. I believe this is an opportune moment to step up these efforts by creating an agency for women that consolidates and refocuses the diverse programmes and operations of the United Nations system.

Progress in asserting gender equality, the empowerment of women and an end to violence against women has required transformative shifts in attitudes of the United Nations, governments and societies at large. However, despite these crucial achievements and immense efforts, women still suffer discrimination and we remain a long way from achieving the goal of gender equality and solving the closely related problems of widespread violence against women. I believe that we all recognize that we, the United Nations family of organizations included, need to be more coherent and consistent in the implementation of international law, of policies and programmes that fight the complex and ubiquitous challenges to women's rights.

No issue needs or deserves the leadership of the General Assembly more than the pursuit of gender equality. During the 63rd session of the General Assembly, our 192 Member States have an opportunity to demonstrate leadership in an historic way. I have committed myself to presiding over the establishment of a new UN entity for women -- one with the authority, presence and resources required to orchestrate the multifaceted campaigns for gender equality.

Thanks to the General Assembly's excellent progress on this score during its last two sessions, the world's women are now within reach of their own global institution. While we recognize the valuable contributions of the various programmes, funds and offices dedicated to the different aspects of gender equality, a comprehensive entity will be able to better coordinate these diverse and sometimes overlapping mandates.

It is entirely possible to change the course of history during this session of the General Assembly – and I am convinced that Member States are determined to replace gender rhetoric with action. We have all agreed that the UN needs new “gender architecture”. And as every architect knows, strong, enduring structures must be balanced. Let’s commit together to consign lip service and tokenism to the past, and create a viable entity for women that will bring equality to the world, and to the UN itself.

Let us commit to establishing an entity during this session. It should be fully funded; led by an Under Secretary-General; and equipped with a full complement of expert staff and targeted programmes. It should be represented in all the most important forums, and should have real operational capacity on the ground.

A UN women’s agency will not speak for women, but will ensure that at long last, women’s own voices can be heard, at all levels of society, and in the decisions that affect their lives. Its country-level staff should be able to harness the local, national, regional and international expertise and resources needed to assess and address the needs of women. It should have the capacity to collect and analyze data on women’s lives and rights; to develop policy; to provide technical advice and assistance on gender and women’s empowerment in every specialized field; to support and monitor the gender-related work of other UN agencies; and to work closely with government partners to plan and oversee programmes at the national level.

The consolidation and rationalization of the UN’s system-wide efforts toward gender equality will be given a new focus and coherence in this time of global crisis. Together, men and women, governments and civil society, we will accelerate the irreversible pace of women’s advancement, of their empowerment, and thus the promises of peace and development for all.