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Statement by Ambassador Melanne Verveer, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, at the Fifty-fourth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, at United Nations Headquarters

Melanne Verveer
Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues
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AS DELIVERED

Thank you. It's a pleasure for me to be with you here today as we mark the 15th anniversary of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women and make the linkages between the Beijing Platform for Action and the achievement of all the Millennium Development Goals. It's especially a pleasure to be here at CSW in my new role as U.S. Representative and as Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. President Obama's establishment of my position and my office is one indication of this Administration's commitment to women's issues and to their integration into mainstream foreign policy.

As President Obama said at the UN in September, "this Assembly's Charter commits each of us to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women." President Obama made clear that those fundamental rights must include "the opportunity for women and girls to pursue their own potential." To help advance this work here at home, President Obama has established the White House Council on Women and Girls, headed by a Senior Advisor and Assistant to the President, to provide a coordinated response to important issues such as equal pay, family leave, child care, violence against women, and women's health care. The Council is joined by the White House Advisor on Violence Against Women – all high-level appointments that further serve to integrate women's issues into domestic policy.

Ambassador Susan Rice who has long advanced women's rights and equality is leading the United States' work at the UN to advance women's rights – fighting for equality, advancing educational and economic opportunities, and ending human trafficking and sexual violence in conflict situations. She has been at the forefront of the efforts to combine several UN offices and agencies into a new, more powerful agency for women. Not only will the new agency streamline women's and girl's issues into one agency, but it also raises the office to be a part of the Secretary General's core team – elevating women's issues to their rightful status.

One of the priorities of my office is promoting the health and well-being of women and girls, which is directly linked not only to the Millennium Development Goals on maternal and child health, but also to women's empowerment and international development more generally.

A decade after the UN established ambitious Millennium Development Goals related to maternal and child health, the global rates of maternal and child mortality remain alarmingly high. Every year, an estimated 530,000 women die from largely preventable complications in pregnancy or childbirth, meaning that a woman dies from pregnancy-related conditions every minute of every day. For every woman who dies, 20 more suffer from injury, infection, or disease. Of the over half million deaths due to pregnancy and childbirth that take place every year, an estimated 34 percent stem from unintended pregnancies, yet over 215 million women still lack access to modern forms of contraception and therefore cannot control their fertility. Despite these statistics, less progress has been made on the MDGs related to maternal health than on any other Millennium Development Goal.

The statistics on the health of children are also alarming. Almost nine million children will die this year, chiefly from preventable causes. We also know that maternal health is inextricably linked to neonatal and child health. According to the World Health Organization, some one million children are left motherless each year, and these children are 10 times more likely to die within two years of their mothers' death.

The persistently high global rates of maternal and child mortality do not stem from uncertainty about how to save the lives of women and children. We know that providing proven, evidence-based interventions—such as skilled birth attendants, access to emergency obstetric care, pre- and post-natal care, nutrition, and access to family planning—will improve maternal and child health, as will strengthening health systems to better respond to the needs of women and girls.

To improve the health of women and girls, we also need to address the myriad economic, cultural, social, and legal barriers that impede their access to needed health care. The unacceptably high rate of maternal mortality is directly linked to persistent gender inequalities, including gender-based violence, harmful traditional practices such as early and forced marriage, lack of education, lack of economic opportunity, and unequal access to adequate health services and facilities.

The United States is committed to reducing maternal and child mortality through its Global Health Initiative, which was announced by President Obama last year and commits to a strong focus on maternal and child health.

The U.S. has also demonstrated its commitment to the health of women and girls by sponsoring a resolution on “Reducing Maternal Mortality and Morbidity through the Empowerment of Women,” along with a cross-regional group of member states. We welcome delegations’ support for this initiative.

Addressing the factors that underpin maternal mortality helps in addressing other Millennium Development goals, including MDG 6 on combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases. AIDS is the number one killer of women of reproductive age worldwide, and nearly 60 percent of people living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa are women. Implementing a women- and girl-centered approach throughout our global health programming, including the fight against infectious diseases, is a central strategy of President Obama’s Global Health Initiative, and represents progress on several MDGs.

Millennium Development Goal 3, on gender equality, is the linchpin – the means to the achievement of all the other MDGs. The Beijing Platform for Action called for the elimination of discrimination against women – both de jure and de facto. Although many states have made progress against de jure discrimination by adopting new laws that prohibit unequal treatment of women, very often those laws are not implemented or enforced. The CEDAW Committee can and does engage directly with each State on implementing obligations in this area, but what is needed is a mechanism that can provide technical assistance to States and examine the issue from a cross-cutting, comparative perspective. A new mechanism could promote best practices and further States’ implementation of provisions that provide for equality before the law. We hope that the consensus adoption of the September 2009 Human Rights Council resolution on “Elimination of Discrimination Against Women” begins the process that will result in the creation of a mechanism to address this crucial issue.

Violence against women is endemic around the world. It not only undermines the possibility of gender equality, it negatively affects women’s healthcare, education, and political and economic participation. The United States places a priority on combating violence against women. We are pleased that emphasis is being placed on this issue not only in the formal deliberations and the side events during CSW, but also through the recent actions in the Security Council. Security Council Resolution 1888 and actions to implement that resolution, including the appointment of Margot Wallström as Special Representative of the Secretary-General, are important steps toward ending this global scourge. We also encourage the Special Rapporteur for Violence Against Women to continue her good work and efforts.

The empowerment of women is also a major cross-cutting theme in the MDGs to end hunger. President Obama’s food security initiative, which Secretary Clinton has been leading, focuses on addressing hunger through greater agricultural productivity, and, especially, women’s access to agricultural training and markets. Women, as we know, are the majority of the world’s farmers, which is why the Rome Principles of Sustainable Food Security, unanimously adopted by 193 countries – including the United States – at the November 2009 World Summit on Food Security, pay particular attention to their needs. Both the United States food security strategy and the Rome Principles seek to identify and eliminate the root causes of hunger and rural poverty through country-owned plans, while at the same time continuing to supply much-needed emergency humanitarian aid. We encourage donor countries to maintain their commitment to the Rome principles, to contribute to the World Bank food security trust fund, and to support negotiated reforms of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and the Committee on Food Security.

The United States also agrees with the Deputy Secretary General that reforming the UN’s gender-related institutions is vital for women around the world and for the effectiveness of the United Nations. The new agency can help women where the need is greatest. This is not a North issue or a South issue. It is an issue for all women, no matter where they live, and we must not let them down. The consensus adoption of Resolution 63/311 by the General Assembly last September reflects the political commitment of member states. We need to make the UN’s gender mechanism function more effectively in moving the priorities of CSW forward and mainstreaming gender throughout the UN system. Member states have the opportunity now to continue this momentum by adopting a new General Assembly resolution making the new women’s agency a reality – and thereby improving the lives of women everywhere.

That same General Assembly resolution should also mark the priorities for that new agency’s activities by establishing funding and governance for overall development activities. The Commission on the Status of Women will play a major role in setting the priorities

for that new entity's activities, through the work we've been doing for years in establishing norms and standards for promoting the empowerment of women and gender equality. We believe it is important for the Commission, at this current session, to go on record to indicate our support for the consolidation of the UN's current structures into a new organization for the world's women.

We also stand ready to assist Secretary-General Ban in appointing the Under Secretary-General to lead the organization. The person selected must have strong organizational skills, a solid record of accomplishments, and stature among the international community, in order to garner respect for the critical issues the unified entity will address.

Study after study has shown that women are drivers of international development. Developing nations stand to gain much from reforms that remove the barriers from this agency, particularly with regard to support for technical assistance to facilitate improvements on the ground. By improving the lives of women, the work of the unified entity will also improve the lives of their families and communities. There is already broad agreement among the member states that most of the entity's staff and resources should be devoted to operational activities in the field. Both developing and developed countries will benefit from the entity's work on women's rights and empowerment. However, we emphasize that gender mainstreaming remains an important concept which must be adhered to even after the entity is fully operational. Creation of this entity in no way detracts from the need for other agencies to factor gender concerns into their work.

The United States is taking steps, as Secretary Clinton noted in a major speech, to put women front and center in our development work and to highlight the relationship between women's progress and the achievement of the MDGs. The Secretary, who as First Lady inspired so many of us fifteen years ago at the Beijing Women's Conference with her strong statement on the affirmation of women's rights as human rights, will deliver a closing address on the afternoon of March 12 to member states, UN officials, and NGO representatives, focusing on the path all of us have ahead to complete the Beijing Agenda.

Thank you. My delegation and I look forward to working with you all during this CSW session. As both the Secretary and I have said on many occasions, no country can get ahead if half its population is left behind. As we share our expertise and experiences and learn from each other, I know all of us will do our part to ensure that every woman – and every country – has every opportunity for success.

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