

As delivered

Opening statement by
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at
Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
Thirty-third Session

Mme. Chairperson,
Distinguished experts of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
Distinguished delegates
Colleagues from the United Nations system
Representatives of non-governmental organizations

It is a pleasure for me to welcome you to the thirty-third session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

This session overlaps with the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council, which began on 29 June with a ministerial segment and high-level round tables. The Council's deliberations will make a critical contribution to the 2005 World Summit which will take place here at United Nations Headquarters from 14 to 16 September. The stakes could not be any higher. More than a billion people live in extreme poverty and 20,000 die each day: the world's leaders will be called upon to re-dedicate themselves to the commitments they made in the Millennium Declaration.

Equally important will be the recommitment to the practical realization of the principle of equality of women and men. From the 10-year review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action we know that significant progress has been made in many countries to advance women's enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms. But we also know that much more needs to be done – and this Committee has worked tirelessly and diligently to highlight the specific areas of concerns in each of the States parties that have come before you for a constructive dialogue about their compliance with the Convention.

The approach your Committee has developed towards gender equality, as reflected in general recommendations, statements and concluding comments, makes very clear that States parties to the Convention are obliged to tackle the structural causes of discrimination against women. Only by challenging the ingrained and systemic roots of women's inequality will women's true equality with men be realized.

Achieving this goal requires action at many different levels, and by all stakeholders. Non-discriminatory legislative and constitutional frameworks are a critical starting point. However, gender-neutral laws may in practice perpetuate discrimination against women. Policies, programmes and practices must be in place to ensure the effective and non-discriminatory application of the law. Remedies must be available, to all women, for alleged violations of their rights, and they must be empowered to take advantage of those remedies. Action must be taken to change stereotypes and attitudes that are discriminatory to women and assign gender-specific roles and responsibilities to women and men – often to the disadvantage of women.

Your Committee, especially in its general recommendation 25 on article 4.1 made it very clear that equality under the Convention means substantive equality. You have clarified that a purely formal legal or programmatic approach is not sufficient to achieve women's de facto equality with men. You have stated that equality of results is the logical corollary of de facto or substantive equality.

The Secretary-General has submitted to the membership a report entitled "In larger freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all", which contains far-reaching proposals for the reform of the Organization. Discussions, based on his proposals, for an outcome document are under way and also focus on gender equality and the empowerment of women. A number of concerns are especially highlighted, namely women's and girls' access to education; reproductive health and rights; equal access to labour markets; representation in government; elimination of violence against women, to name but a few.

One of the pillars in the Secretary-General's report is the protection and promotion of human rights. The Secretary-General proposes to revitalize the United Nations entire human rights machinery, starting with the replacement of the discredited Commission on Human Rights with a new Human Rights Council. In the same report, the Secretary-General requested the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Louise Arbour, to put forward proposals for strengthening support for human rights work. In May 2005, the High Commissioner launched her Plan of Action, entitled "Protection and Empowerment". The Plan aims to strengthen the Office so that it would be better positioned to respond to today's human rights imperatives and better equipped to help to bridge the gap between the articulation of rights and the realities on the ground. The overarching goals of protection and empowerment would be pursued through three key strategies: engagement with countries, exercising leadership and building partnerships.

The Plan of Action makes it clear that the High Commissioner wishes to take a more proactive and engaged role with United Nations human rights bodies, including the human rights treaty bodies. While noting that protection of human rights has been one of the greatest achievements of the United Nations, she also concedes that the current system has problems and inefficiencies which must be addressed. Short-term measures, such as the use of harmonized guidelines on reporting would allow the treaty bodies to function as a unified system. In that context, the High Commissioner also proposes transferring of responsibility for supporting CEDAW to OHCHR.

As to the long term, the High Commissioner discusses the need to find means to consolidate the work of the existing treaty bodies – and those which may be established in the future - so that they can function as a single unified body. The Plan of Action, therefore, includes the creation of a unified standing treaty body. In developing proposals for a unified standing treaty body, the High Commissioner believes that serious discussions will be required with committee members, States parties, United Nations system entities, non-governmental organizations and other parts of civil society, such as national human rights institutions. The High Commissioner announced to the recent Inter-Committee Meeting that her Office will prepare a concept paper of modalities for a permanent standing body by early 2006, which would be circulated to treaty bodies, States parties, United Nations system partners, NGOs, and others for comments. Both the concept paper and the comments might be considered at an informal brainstorming meeting, in which representatives of all stakeholders, most importantly the treaty bodies, would participate, and which would be convened in May 2006. She intends to convene a two-day intergovernmental consultation, possibly in July 2006, to discuss options for reform.

Your Committee will have the opportunity to discuss these issues further. Given your expertise in the promotion and protection of women's rights, I urge you to make a contribution to this reform process which is underway. The Organization as a whole is undergoing change. Your active and constructive participation would be a service both to the women of the world and to the Organization. Your Chairperson, together with two members of the Committee attended the ICM and will brief you in more detail about these proposals and the preliminary comments and views that were discussed in Geneva. I myself attended these meetings and will be looking forward to the Committee's views on these matters.

Mme. Chairperson,

Many competing interests, demands, hopes and expectations will be vying for attention and action in the weeks leading up to the 2005 World Summit. I believe that in all these discussions, the paramount guiding principle must be the benefit which women on the ground, in their daily lives – in their families, workplaces, communities, and public office – will be able to gain from the discussions and decisions that will be taken. This interest has always been paramount to the work of your Committee.

I wish you a successful session.
