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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: enhanced participation of women in development: an enabling environment for achieving gender equality and the advancement of women, taking into account, inter alia, the fields of education, health and work

Panel discussion on enhanced participation of women in development: an enabling environment for gender equality and the advancement of women, taking into account, inter alia, the fields of education, health and work

Summary submitted by the moderator Dicky Komar (Indonesia)

1. At its fourth meeting, on 28 February 2006, the Commission held a panel discussion followed by a dialogue on the theme “Enhanced participation of women in development: an enabling environment for gender equality and the advancement of women, taking into account, inter alia, the fields of education, health and work”. The panellists were: Torild Skard, researcher at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs; Ana Elisa Osorio, member of the Executive Board of the National Institute for Women of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela; Bernadette Lahai, Chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee on Agriculture and Food Security of Sierra Leone; Evy Messell, Director of the Bureau for Gender Equality of the International Labour Organization (ILO); and Akanksha A. Marphatia, senior education policy analyst of ActionAid and member of the expert group convened by the Division on the Advancement of Women in Bangkok from 8 to 11 November 2005. The panel was moderated by Dicky Komar, Vice-Chairperson of the Commission.

2. Participants underscored the importance of creating an enabling environment for gender equality and the advancement of women. Women's participation in development should encompass not only their representation and involvement in relevant processes, but also aim to ensure women's empowerment, access to opportunities and resources, and the strengthening of women's capabilities, voice and agency. The creation of an enabling environment would contribute to bridging the persistent gap between policy and practice, and facilitate the full implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. Such implementation would, in turn, contribute to the achievement of internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals. The key role played by the women's movement in the achievement of gender equality was pointed out.

3. Participants drew attention to the persistent challenges to, and provided examples of, successful strategies in the creation of an enabling environment. At the global, regional and national levels, the lack or insufficient implementation of existing policies, programmes and actions to enhance women's participation in development was a major challenge. Existing gender equality policies were not well integrated into overall global, regional or national development frameworks, which therefore had not achieved the expected results. There was also insufficient attention paid to the root causes of women's inequality and discrimination against women and girls, such as sociocultural constraints, and no or insufficient legislative frameworks to protect women's rights and promote gender equality. Macroeconomic and social policies and institutions did not take gender perspectives into sufficient consideration. It was noted that education, health services and social protection were being increasingly privatized, and thus considered private commodities. The result was a decrease in social sector spending, with disproportionate adverse effects on women and girls.

4. Participants discussed the right to education and the importance of education for economic growth, increased agricultural productivity and participation in employment, improved health standards, and changes in the attitudes of both women and men. Participants stressed the need for high-quality education that promoted women's rights and equality and provided knowledge leading to empowerment and social change. It was acknowledged that education in itself did not guarantee women's increased participation in development. Barriers or disincentives to women's education included school fees, the lack of girl-friendly infrastructure, the violence against women and girls, including harmful traditional practices, women's limited control over the distribution of household resources, as well as limited employment opportunities for educated women and girls. Participants gave examples of strategies and measures for enhancing women's education, including legislative and regulatory measures, free and compulsory education, prevention of early and forced marriages, incentives such as scholarships, adult literacy campaigns, gender-sensitive curricula, textbooks and teacher training, and sociocultural measures to combat stereotypes. Participants stressed the need for girls' education in non-traditional subjects such as science, as well as the critical importance of reforming existing male-dominated educational systems to make them gender-sensitive and to ensure that they supported the promotion of gender equality.

5. Participants discussed the right to health and the importance of women's guaranteed access to health care, in particular in relation to women's and girls' participation in education and employment. In that regard, participants drew attention to such challenges as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, insufficient infrastructure,

the lack of resources at the household level and the persistence of discriminatory practices and attitudes. Participants gave examples of strategies and measures to improve women's and girls' health, such as the provision of adequate and women-friendly services pertaining to sexual and reproductive health, free primary health care, nutritional support for poor women and girls and prevention and education measures. The mass media were recognized as a tool to promote women's access to health care and to combat discriminatory practices. Participants stressed the need for policy and legal frameworks to ensure minimum standards of health care and the role of Governments as the primary providers of health and social services to women.

6. Participants noted that even though a greater number of women participated in the formal economy and new opportunities for women's employment had been created, occupational segregation and wage gaps persisted. The majority of poor women worked in the informal sector, which was characterized by insecurity, instability, discrimination and a lack of social protection. Successful strategies for ensuring gender equality in employment included social and economic policies that promoted decent work together with economic growth; inclusive social security and protection systems; enforcement of international labour standards; protection of women in the workplace including from sexual harassment; services and support for women entrepreneurs and women in the informal sector; tripartite social dialogue; and organizing women workers to increase their involvement in decision-making, including employment policy-making.

7. Participants suggested that the creation of an enabling environment for women's participation in development required multisectoral, integrated approaches and a range of measures, including political commitment at the highest levels; institutional and organizational change; the adoption and implementation of sector-specific policies and programmes; the establishment and enforcement of legislative frameworks in line with the obligations under international human rights instruments, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and ILO conventions; sociocultural change; adequate resources and gender-responsive budget initiatives; accountability and monitoring mechanisms; and capacity-building and public awareness-raising. Opportunities for quick-impact interventions in the sectors of education, health and employment should be seized, while long-term and sustainable efforts were also needed. Gender analysis should inform all such efforts. Participants also called for the use of a rights-based framework in support of women's, especially poor women's, rights, including rights to property, inheritance and land.

8. Participants underlined the need for the consistent use of the gender mainstreaming strategy for the creation of an enabling environment. At the same time, there was an ongoing need for targeted actions for women and girls, as well as for specific measures for groups of women, such as women in rural areas, disabled and indigenous women.

9. The key role played by the United Nations in the promotion of gender equality was reiterated. Governments, the United Nations and the international financial institutions were called upon to address the gender dimensions of development and the global economy, and to integrate those in development frameworks, including the poverty reduction strategy papers and poverty reduction and growth facilities, as

well as in trade policies and aid modalities. Consultation processes with stakeholders should ensure meaningful representation of women's organizations.

10. Participants stressed that the full participation of women at all levels of decision-making was essential for the creation of an enabling environment. The use of quotas and other positive measures by political parties and public bodies was well established; more recent innovations included quotas in decision-making bodies of private companies. The involvement of men and boys in the creation of an enabling environment should be further strengthened.

11. Participants noted the need to enhance monitoring frameworks, including through the collection, analysis and use of sex-disaggregated data and statistics, and the further development of indicators. A recent report by the United Nations Statistics Division highlighted progress and continuing gaps in that regard.
