

Statement

by

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at the

NGO Consultation on *CSW at 50: Glancing Back, Moving Forward*
NGO Committee on the Status of Women
Panel discussion on “Forward Looking Issues and Advocacy Strategies”

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New York University (NYU)
Farkas Auditorium

Dear participants,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Colleagues and friends,

It is a great honor for me to address this consultation on *CSW at 50: Glancing Back, Moving Forward*. I would like to thank Jackie Shapiro and the NGO Committee on the Status of Women for inviting me. I would also like to thank your Committee for your strong commitment to the advancement of women, and your support and cooperation with my Office and the Division for the Advancement of Women.

Tomorrow, the fiftieth session of the Commission on the Status of Women will open at the United Nations Headquarters. We have come a long way since June 1946, when a resolution of the Economic and Social Council established the Commission on the Status of Women as one of its full-fledged functional commissions. The foundations of many of the successes that women have achieved to date in the international arena were laid by a group of dedicated women, among them the first Chair of the Commission Bodil Begtrup (Denmark), the first Vice-Chair, Jessie Street (Australia), members Amalia Caballero Ledon (Mexico) and Isabel Urdaneta (Venezuela), participated as part of their national delegations in the United Nations founding conference in San Francisco. Later, in the early years of the United Nations, they fought relentlessly for the recognition of women’s equal rights in the Organization’s founding documents. Between 1946 and 1948, the original 15 members of the Commission worked tirelessly with the Commission on Human Rights to ensure that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirmed, not just the inalienable rights of all men, but of all human beings. As Devaki Jain recalls in her recently published book titled *Women, Development and the UN: A Sixty-Year Quest for Equality and Justice*, this was by no means an easy task; when the

United Nations was founded in 1945, only 30 of the original 51 Member States afforded women the right to vote.

The Commission discovered very early in its establishment that allies were essential to the success of its mission and at that time, that legislation was an important instrument in bringing about change. Thus, the Commission allied itself with civil society organizations -- at its first session in 1947, it heard 12 women's organizations -- and with the General Assembly to push its agenda forward. The advocacy role of civil society has been heightened over the years. While the Assembly played a key role in the achievement of the landmark legal instrument for women -- the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women -- the so called women's bill of rights and in approving the four world conferences which mobilized the world to focus on the situation of women and girls. What is interesting to note is that very early on in this campaign, more than 30 years ago, women acknowledged the interlinkages between elimination of discrimination -- equality, development and peace. These formed the theme for the first women's conference in 1975 in Mexico. Regrettably, not much was done to operationalize this linkage and the pursuit of women's advancement and empowerment proceeded along sectoral lines. Somehow, although women knew that the solution lay in their being placed in the centre rather than being sidelined, how to get to the centre remained elusive. It was not until 1995 at Beijing that women figured out that equality with men required that all policies and programmes take into account the interests, concerns and roles of both men and women. They must thus embark on gender mainstreaming as a strategy for gender equality and empowerment of women. This was among the innovations that are contained in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

At last year's session of the Commission, devoted to the review and appraisal of implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Member States recognized that progress in such areas as improved life expectancy and declining fertility rates; increased enrollment of girls in primary education; increased employment; and greater participation of women in decision-making had been made. Yet while women might have achieved de jure equality, the implementation of the law was far too slow and insufficient, and women were often denied the opportunity to enjoy their rights.

This is why the fiftieth session of the Commission offers an opportunity for all of us to pause and to think, not just about the achievements made in the advancement of women during the past sixty years, but especially to think of the ways in which we can, and must, push women's agenda forward. Today's panel discussion on *Forward-looking Issues and Advocacy Strategies* is therefore both important and strategically timed.

It comes at a period of unprecedented and large-scale effort to reform the United Nations so that it may better respond to the challenges of the 21st century.

While the work on reform was started by the Secretary-General Mr. Kofi Annan back in 1997, reforms took a new turn in early 2005, when he introduced his report entitled *In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All*.

The report proposed further reforms necessary to fulfill the United Nations' role in advancing, with equal determination, inter-related goals of security, development and human rights across the world. As he eloquently stated in that report, "humanity will not enjoy security without development, development without security, and it will not enjoy either without respect for human rights." The very same message which women were articulating at the first Conference on women.

The Summit Outcome of September 2005, endorsed the bulk of reforms proposed by the Secretary-General in his report, and gave him a clear mandate to move ahead on some of the most pressing ones.

One of the first tangible outcomes of the reform process to date has been the establishment, by the General Assembly on 20 December 2005, of a Peacebuilding Commission. The challenges of helping countries in the transition from conflict to lasting peace, which had remained largely uncovered, were to be addressed by the Peacebuilding Commission. It will marshal resources at the disposal of the international community to advise and propose integrated strategies for post-conflict recovery, focusing attention on reconstruction, institution-building and sustainable development. In the words of General Assembly President Jan Eliasson, the Commission represents a mechanism to "ensure that for countries emerging from conflict, post-conflict does not mean post-engagement of the international community."

My Office worked closely with all stakeholders to ensure that the resolution establishing the Peacebuilding Commission reaffirmed the role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peacebuilding, and the importance of their equal participation in decision-making in matters of war and peace. We advocated that the gender perspective be reflected, not only in the mandate but also in the day-to-day work of the Commission. We proposed as well, the establishment of a post of Gender Advisor, at a senior level, as part of the new Peacebuilding Support Office within the United Nations Secretariat.

A Democracy Fund, which will offer financial support to countries undergoing the process of democratization, was established in 2005 alongside the Peacebuilding Commission, to further strengthen the United Nations' assistance to states seeking to build sustainable peace.

Equally far-reaching is the Secretary-General's proposal to create a Human Rights Council, making human rights one of the pillars of the United Nations work.

Also in the realm of human rights, work continues on the strengthening of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Its regular budget and staffing were almost doubled lately, thus providing the Office with new capacity to monitor and report on violations of human rights in general and women's rights in particular.

Both processes, the creation of the Council and strengthening of the Office of the High Commissioner, offer new opportunities to promote women's human rights and stop abuses and violence against women. For decades, women across the world tirelessly and valiantly fought to have their rights treated as fundamental human rights. These efforts culminated at the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna in 1993, when women's rights were fully recognized as human rights.

Given the centrality of women's human rights to the mission of this Organization, we are working with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to place women's rights at the centre of the Organization's work on human rights. This work includes an enhanced role and impact of the CEDAW Committee in the new institutional structure of human rights in the United Nations.

During the 2005 World Summit, the leaders further considered vital, the reform of the Security Council so as to be more broadly representative of the realities of today's world. An authoritative and more representative Security Council has the potential to better protect civilians, including women and children, in armed conflicts, stop mass rapes and killings and promote women's role in peace processes. Member States of the United Nations remain divided on some fundamental issues pertaining to peace and security, including on the Council reform, definition of terrorism, the responsibility to protect and on the right to use force. Dialogue on these issues continues.

Another area of the Secretary-General's proposals is management reform. The well known shortcomings in the Oil-for-Food Programme, sexual exploitation by the United Nations staff and related personnel, and procurement irregularities in peacekeeping, reflected badly on the image and credibility of the Organization.

The Secretary-General is moving swiftly to address these shortcomings and enhance integrity, efficiency and accountability in the Secretariat. Let me mention in this regard, the establishment of an Ethics Office in December 2005, new policies on whistleblower protection and financial disclosure, zero tolerance policy for sexual exploitation, and a Management Performance Board to systematically assess the performance of senior managers. My Office advocates for new affirmative measures to achieve the 50/50 gender balance in the Secretariat and works with the Office of Human Resources Management to update the existing instructions on prevention of sexual harassment.

A management reform report of the Secretary-General will be presented to the General Assembly next month.

Also in response to the Summit Outcome, all mandates of the United Nations Secretariat that are older than five years are currently under review, in order to refine the Organization's focus and renew its objectives. The review would provide an opportunity for Member States to reassess the mandates for women's advancement and empowerment with a view to strengthen them and to

ensure coherence, collaboration and coordination, and avoid duplication of efforts. A related report on this issue is being finalized and will be submitted to the Assembly shortly.

As you can see, ambitious reform proposals are underway in the United Nations. But much more needs to be done. The challenges facing the United Nations in carrying out these reforms are daunting. However, past experience has demonstrated that the Organization has the remarkable ability to change and adjust to new requirements and mandates given by Member States. It also proved that, despite shortcomings, fundamental principles upon which the Organization was founded are sound and no less relevant today than they were sixty years ago.

The reforms give us a historic opportunity to transform the United Nations into a much more efficient and transparent instrument for both member states and civil society. But these measures will not implement themselves. They require further decisions by the General Assembly and broad support by civil society, including women's NGOs. To win those decisions and support, we must convince a broad majority that a more efficient United Nations will better serve, and be more accountable to, not just one or a few Member States, but all women and men of the world.
