



# IRELAND

Statement by

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Permanent Representative

55<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

Item 3: General Debate on Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

New York, 28<sup>th</sup> February 2011

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Mr. Chairman,

Before turning to the specific themes of this session, I would like to take a moment to comment on the wider context in which the 2011 session of CSW is taking place.

This is a moment both of great hope and great challenge for our Organisation and for our world. The CSW meets against a backdrop of extraordinary events unfolding in North Africa and the Middle East. An old order is crumbling, and long stifled voices are calling out for dignity, justice and basic human rights.

There will be many fora in which to engage with and learn the lessons of these events. But there is one lesson to be underlined in the context of this Commission. In the tidal wave for change that is sweeping the region, women have been equal partners and equal actors. They have framed the messages, operated the computers and the phones, and taken to the streets with the same passion and fearlessness as men.

With the script beginning to be written for the next stage, female voices must continue to resonate equally with male voices. As the transition is made from streets to smoke filled rooms, there will almost certainly be a temptation to leave women outside.

It would be unforgiveable if this were to be allowed happen – not just in terms of the erosion of women's rights that would be involved, but also in terms of the loss of vision and talent that are so urgently needed as these countries begin to chart their new futures.

The period ahead will be a test for the United Nations: a test of whether our rhetoric and resolutions can connect with real life, and influence outcomes where it truly matters – on the ground.

At this time of such challenge, we are fortunate that the UN has restructured in a way that greatly sharpens the focus on women's rights. Empowerment of women will be among the great defining movements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. UN Women, so ably headed by Michelle Bachelet, will put the UN at the forefront of that movement.



## **Specific themes**

Let me turn now to the key themes of this session: access to education and employment; and protection of the girl child. On both themes, I would like to indicate an Irish perspective – sketch out some domestic initiatives and also some of the issues on which we are focusing in our development policy.

I would underline that gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is a key cross-cutting priority in our overall development policy. We recognise that gender equality is a human right, and that eliminating discrimination against women and girls is essential to efforts to advance human development.

### ***Access to Education and to Employment***

The Irish educational system is highly rated internationally; we know from our own experience the transformative effect on societies and economies of broadening access to education.

In terms of the gender differential, we experience the same phenomenon as many other countries: girls outperform boys in the educational system generally but tend to opt more frequently for traditionally more feminised subjects.

In order to support our dynamic high-tech sector, Ireland has continued over recent years to strengthen the emphasis on encouraging graduates in the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects. While the number of graduates in these fields has increased considerably, men continue to outnumber women. New strategies for the teaching of mathematics and “science and technology” subjects have recently been introduced with the hope that these will particularly benefit girls.

Consistent with our national experience, education is a central focus of our development policy. The multiplier effects of increasing the education levels of girls is well-established, and eliminating gender discrimination in access and retention rates at schools is a key element of Irish Aid’s approach. A couple of concrete illustrations:

- In Zambia, Ireland provides core support to the Government of Zambia education programme which addresses issues of access, quality and equity. In our dialogue with the Government, issues of gender equity and access to schooling for vulnerable children are central.

- In Mozambique, Ireland supported the development of a strategy to support the protection of girls from sexual exploitation and abuse as they travel to and from, and within schools. This strategy was first used in a single province and has now been approved by the Ministry of Education for use at a national level.

In both countries, Irish Aid also works with civil society in advancing these educational priorities.

### ***Discrimination and violence against the Girl Child***

In this area too, Ireland has sought to ensure that our commitment to action at domestic level proceeds in parallel with an appropriate prioritisation in our development policies.

Last year, following a lengthy consultation process, Ireland published a new Strategy on Violence Against Women. The objective is that, by the end of 2014, there will be clearer societal acknowledgment of the unacceptability of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence coupled with greater confidence in high-quality services to support victims.

A further area of focus has been the drive to combat the growing problem of human trafficking. A range of measures have been adopted, including (i) strengthening of the legislation and the publication of an Action Plan on trafficking with a special focus on Children; (ii) increase of penalties for trafficking offences; (iii) extension of training to a wide variety of personnel in state organisations; (iv) undertaking a range of awareness measures.

The same commitment to combating gender-based violence is reflected in our development work. To help inform that work, we have established at national level a Joint Consortium on Gender-based violence, which brings together Irish Aid, humanitarian, human rights and development NGOs and the Defence Forces with the aim of sharing best practice and strengthening institutional response.

Building on the knowledge developed through the work of the Joint Consortium, we have developed partnerships across our bilateral aid programme to combat gender-based violence. In Sierra Leone, for example, we helped fund civil society support centres; and in Uganda we support research on the impact of community based prevention work.



## **Cross learning**

None of our societies, in any region of the world, has attained full equality for women; all of us are on a journey and we need to learn from and support each other as we make that journey.

In Ireland, for example, we have had a General Election in the past few days and it was disappointing that women candidates for election accounted for only 15% percent of candidates overall. We clearly have scope to learn from others what approaches have worked best in bringing about a higher level of women's engagement in politics.

In areas where we can ourselves contribute to cross learning, we have been exploring innovative ways of doing so. In 2008, for example, Ireland worked with Northern Ireland, Timor Leste and Liberia to develop a cross learning initiative on resolution 1325; we presented the findings of this exercise to USG Bachelet in October 2010.

Indeed, one of the most stimulating aspects of CSW is the learning and sharing opportunities which it provides. During this session, Ireland has co-hosted two side events directly connected to the priority and review themes. At the first, we learned from young Israeli and Palestinian women how they are using technology to build tolerance. At the second, we heard from young Zambian girls of their hopes and dreams, and of the fundamental importance of education in helping to make those dreams realisable.

## **Conclusion**

I would conclude with a return to my opening theme. All of us present at the CSW are privileged to be here. The energy and solidarity of these two weeks will sustain us in the work that lies ahead. But the real test for the UN – for the CSW and for UN Women – is the impact on the ground.

Around the world – most visibly, over these past weeks, in North Africa and the Middle East – women who would describe themselves as ordinary, have shown us how extraordinary they are. We are inspired by the courage and dignity with which they lay claim to the rights that the UN stands for. Our task is to keep faith with these women: to bridge the distance from New York to all those places where women are in urgent need of our affirmation and support.