

ISRAEL

63rd Session of the General Assembly

Check against Delivery

Statement by
Ms. Sandra Simovich
Delegate to the Third Committee

Agenda item 56 (a)
“Advancement of Women”

During debate in the Third Committee

United Nations, New York
15 October 2008

PERMANENT MISSION OF ISRAEL
TO THE UNITED NATIONS
800 Second Avenue, 15th Floor
New York, NY 10017



Tel: 212-499-5510
Fax: 212-499-5515
info-un@newyork.mfa.gov.il
<http://www.israel-un.org>

Mr. Chairman,

At the outset, allow me to congratulate you for your able stewardship of this Committee.

Mr. Chairman, this year there will be many events commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While the international community rightfully celebrates this important document, it is also an appropriate time to reflect on continued challenges to its realization, particularly regarding women's equality.

Violence against women and girls, Mr. Chairman, remains one of the persistent challenges to gender equality. It is both an expression of this bias, and an outcome of all its structural causes. Social constraints, and a lack of financial independence, employment opportunities, and legal standing, can all contribute to conditions that allow far too many women to be terrorized. As the Secretary-General points out in his latest report on Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women (A/63/214), States should include measures to address these causes in any comprehensive strategy. However, an understanding of these causes must in no way excuse the perpetrators of these crimes. My delegation is heartened to learn from the Report of the progress some States have made in this regard by putting in place new or strengthened legislation on violence against women. Israel hopes that the Secretary-General's multi-year campaign to end violence against women and girls, launched in February, will provide the impetus needed for additional States to take action, including by dedicating resources to policies and programmes. Women cannot wait for socio-cultural attitudes to change; they need robust laws, and gender-sensitive police and judicial systems to protect them and prosecute violators.

Mr. Chairman,

Earlier this year, Israel established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. This body, part of the Labour Ministry, is responsible for collecting statistics on equality in the workplace, and conducts campaigns informing women throughout the country of their rights. The Commission also serves as an ombudsman for women and members of minority groups, where individuals can receive information and advice and lodge complaints when they suspect workplace discrimination. In cases where women's rights are violated, the Commission can initiate legal action on their behalf.

In addition to the Commission, Israel has two other Governmental bodies with a gender focus. The parliamentary Committee on the Status of Women drafts gender-related legislation, and is a focal point for civil society input. The Committee also promotes equality in education and works to reduce gaps in the economy and labour market. The Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women, a branch of the Prime Minister's Office, helps formulate national policy that advances equality, coordinates relevant Governmental activities, and ensures that a gender advisor is appointed to the mayor of every single city, council, and town throughout the State of Israel. Both bodies work to end violence against women.

Many nations represented here will identify with Israel's experience, which has been that, in spite of a number of initiatives, the record, so far, has shown mixed results. For example, women earn only 83% of men's salaries. This is an improvement over the past, but we still have far to go. Moreover, the heavy representation of women in the public sector makes them particularly vulnerable to Government cutbacks.

Efforts toward equal representation in Government have also achieved uneven success. In the Knesset, for example, only 17 out of 120 members are women – a low rate compared with many other developed countries. In the cabinet, only a small minority of positions are held by women, although some positions they do hold are central ones. My minister, who is currently trying to form a new coalition Government, is one such example. In response to the shortfalls that still exist, the Knesset's Committee on the Status of Women is also tasked with increasing women's representation in Government. Israel is committed to achieving gender equality, socially, economically and politically.

Legislating equality and promoting equal representation in Government are effective top-down strategies for achieving women's rights, but civil society is taking the lead in organizing, educating and representing women at the grass-roots level. Israel's vibrant NGO community – numbering over 200 organizations – complements Governmental activities, and helps push forward the agenda of gender equality. Many of these organizations provide input “upstream” into the legislative process, while giving support, information and specialized education to many individuals, including to Israeli Arabs.

Mr. Chairman,

In July this year, Israel ratified the Palermo Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. My delegation applauds UNODC's work in this area, including its three-pronged approach to eliminating trafficking – prevention, protection and prosecution. The very nature of this crime requires international cooperation, and my delegation endorses strengthening existing United Nations structures to fight trafficking in persons, especially women and children. Israel's policy of providing protection and support for victims, rather than prosecution, is in agreement with the recommendations of the Secretary-General in his report on trafficking in women and girls.

Mr. Chairman,

Israel shares the concerns expressed by the Security Council in its groundbreaking resolution 1325 (2000), on Women, Peace and Security. The resolution recognized the new reality that civilians are increasingly targeted as a tool of war, and proposed concrete actions that States and the Organization can take to combat this violence. My delegation also hails the Security Council's recent adoption of Resolution 1820 (2008), which builds on Resolution 1325 and condemns violence – sexual violence in particular – in the context of armed conflict. The international community should spare no effort to put an end to these crimes. Any sincere strategy in this regard must include a firm policy for ending impunity. All perpetrators, acting under any flag, must be brought to justice.

Mr. Chairman,

My delegation must voice its opinion on an issue that will arise many times in the coming weeks as Member States negotiate resolutions allocated to this Committee. It must be noted that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights unambiguously set the standard to which we adhere, and that we are still trying to attain: “the equal rights of men and women.” There are no grey areas, and the Declaration does not qualify the term “equal.” We should not go back in time by trying to impose such limitations or conditions for any reason.

Property rights, including that of owning land, is an issue explicitly addressed in the Universal Declaration. Ensuring equal property rights for women can provide a direct route toward economic empowerment, and, ultimately, a greater political voice. While some entrenched interests may feel threatened, equality is not a “zero sum game”; societies and economies as a whole benefit by having all their members participate and contribute fully. Likewise, equality in legal proceedings will give women the legal tools they need to ensure that all their other rights are upheld. It is impossible to overemphasize the fact that declarations and legislation without enforcement will change little.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, it should be recognized that in spite of our differences, women around the world can find a great deal of common ground. This is no less true in regions of conflict. Israel strongly supports last month’s Security Council Presidential Statement on Mediation. Reaffirming the judgments of Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820, the Statement stresses women’s crucial role in the pacific settlement of disputes and in peacebuilding. In the spirit of these documents, the Israeli Women’s Equal Rights Law has been amended to mandate that the Government include women in any group appointed to peace-building negotiations and conflict resolution.

In societies which are most under stress, women provide the greatest sense of stability and continuity. Women are the ones who struggle to raise families, often alone, and often under the most difficult and tragic conditions imaginable. This half of our world, then, has another voice, a different set of priorities, that must be heard if we are to set a new path toward a more productive, peaceful and secure future for all the world’s people.

Thank you.

