

United Nations

Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)

Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)

Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)

Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)

Expert Group Meeting on

Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes, with particular emphasis on political participation and leadership

24 to 27 October 2005

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Aide-Memoire

I. Introduction

In accordance with its multi-year programme of work for 2001-2006, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) will consider “Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels” as one of two thematic issues during its fiftieth session in 2006. In order to contribute to a further understanding of this issue and to assist the Commission in its deliberations, the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), in collaboration with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), is organizing an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on “Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes, with particular emphasis on political participation and leadership”. The EGM will be hosted by the ECA in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from October 24-27 2005.

The findings and recommendations of the Expert Group Meeting will be presented at the panel discussion on equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels during the 50th session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

II. Background

Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes the right of every person to take part in the government of his or her country. Equal access of men and women to power, decision-making and leadership at all levels is a necessary precondition for the proper functioning of democracy. Equal participation of men and women in political affairs makes governments more representative of the composition of society; it makes them more accountable and transparent, and ensures that the interests of women are taken into account in policy-making. Women, however, have traditionally been excluded from power and decision-making processes.

The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) provides the basis for realizing equality between women and men through ensuring women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life,

including the right to vote and to stand for election, as well as to hold public office at all levels of government (Article 7). States parties agree to take all appropriate measures to overcome historical discrimination against women and obstacles to women's participation in decision-making processes (Article 8), including legislation and temporary special measures (Article 4). The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women consistently expresses concern over the low rate of implementation of Articles 7 and 8 of the Convention. In its general recommendation 23 of 1997 the Committee reviewed the persisting barriers to women's participation in political and public life and set out a series of steps for Governments to take in order to abide fully by Articles 7 and 8, urging especially the adoption of temporary special measures in accordance with Article 4 of the Convention.

The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, brought attention to the persisting inequality between men and women in decision-making. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action recognize women's unequal share of power and decision-making as one of the twelve critical areas of concern. The Platform for Action outlines concrete actions to ensure women's equal access to, and full participation in, power structures (Strategic Objective G.1), and to increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership (Strategic Objective G.2).

The Agreed Conclusions 1997/2 of the 41st session of the Commission on the Status of Women's on women in power and decision-making processes called for the acceleration of implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in order to achieve women's full and equal participation in decision-making. Governments were urged, *inter alia*, to establish time-bound targets for reaching the goal of gender balance in decision-making, and ensure gender mainstreaming in legislation. The Agreed Conclusions stress the importance that achieving equal participation in decision-making has for the strengthening of democracy (para 2).

The outcome document adopted by the 23rd special session of the General Assembly in 2000¹ reviewed achievements in the promotion of women into power and decision-making positions. It noted that an increasing number of countries had adopted positive discrimination policies, including the establishment of quota systems during elections, setting of measurable goals, and the development of leadership training for women. However, there continue to be significant obstacles to reaching gender balance in decision-making bodies at all levels: "Women continue to be under-represented in the legislative, ministerial and sub-ministerial levels, as well as at the highest levels of the corporate sector and other economic and social institutions" (G.23).

The commitment to achieve gender equality in power and decision-making in political affairs was reaffirmed, *inter alia*, by Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security of 2000, which called for the integration of a gender perspective into the negotiation and implementation of peace agreements.

¹ *Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the 21st Century*

General Assembly Resolution 58/142 on Women and Political Participation in 2003 urged Member States to eliminate all discriminatory laws in their national legislatures, counter “negative societal attitudes about women’s capacity to participate equally in the political process” (para 1d), and “institute educational programmes...in the school curriculum that sensitize young people about the equal rights of women” (para 1g).

The 49th session of the Commission on the Status of Women in February-March 2005 reviewed the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and of the outcome document of the 23rd special session of the General Assembly.² Most Member States reported the introduction of measures aimed at increasing the participation of women in various levels of decision-making processes, and reported progress in getting women into positions of power (para 327). Equitable participation remains a challenge, however, and only eleven Member States have reached the critical mass of 30% of women in parliament (para 331). While hailing the progress made by Member States so far, the Commission concluded that a wide range of customs, traditions and stereotypes in most cultures impede women’s participation in decision-making processes (para 351); that despite significant democratization since 1995, the only steady increase in women’s participation in decision-making has been at the local level (para 351); and that devolution of power to the local level created opportunities for women to gain more meaningful participation (para 351). It called for the study of linkages between women’s economic and political empowerment (para 352), of the way in which women’s political participation leads to the transformation of political institutions and processes (para 353), and for the study of the costs of women’s exclusion vis-à-vis the goal of sustainable development (para 354).

Women have gained the right to vote, and possess *de jure* equality, in nearly all Member States of the United Nations. However, despite forming at least half the electorate in most countries, they continue to be underrepresented as candidates for public office. In 1995, approximately 10 percent of members of national assemblies across the world were women (Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Article 182), and even fewer women held positions in the government. These figures fall short of reaching the target of having 30 percent of women in positions at decision-making levels by 1995 endorsed by the Economic and Social Council. The figure of 30 percent forms the so-called “critical mass”, believed to be necessary for women to make a visible impact on the style and content of political decision-making.

Since 1995, women’s visibility in, and impact on, public life has grown. Women represented 11.3 percent of all legislators in 1995, and 15.7 percent in 2005.³ The overall increase, however, hides regional fluctuations, and there has been no increase in the percentage of women in government positions over this period. The rate of increase in leadership positions held by women remains low. Women continue to have to choose

² *Review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century” – Report of the Secretary-General.* Commission on the Status of Women, 49th session, 28 February – 11 March 2005 (E/CN.6/2005/2)

³ *Women in Politics: 1945-2005 (Information Kit).* Inter-Parliamentary Union, Geneva 2005.

between a career and child-rearing responsibilities, which leads many of them to opt out of competition for the top-level jobs. At home as well as at work they continue to lack an enabling environment for their career advancement and empowerment. Women are still largely absent from top executive jobs, especially in the traditionally male-dominated spheres of business, science and politics. In national governments where women hold ministerial functions, their portfolios are typically limited to social, family and cultural affairs (IPU 1999).⁴

III. Objectives

The overall objective of the meeting is to analyze the current situation of women in decision-making processes, with particular emphasis on their political participation and leadership at the international, national, regional and local levels. The meeting will develop policy recommendations for achieving equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes based on the identification of the most promising practices and lessons learned to date.

The meeting will:

- Examine conditions that facilitate women's representation in decision-making processes within the context of current socio-economic and political transformations;
- Consider the interplay between women's economic and political participation, focusing on the persisting barriers to women's entry into politics in light of their economic empowerment in the past decades;
- Examine the linkages between women's presence in decision-making bodies at all levels and their impact on policy formulation and the conduct of political institutions;
- Explore the extent to which women's presence in decision-making bodies facilitates the mainstreaming of a gender perspective into policies;
- Examine the conditions under which political bodies commit to gender balance and gender mainstreaming in processes and outcomes;
- Examine the conditions under which women work across party lines, including with male allies;
- Propose strategies to advance women's participation and leadership through, *inter alia*, capacity-building, coalition-building and gender-sensitive institutional policies, programmes and mechanisms.

IV. Expected Outcome

The outcome of the Expert Group Meeting will be a report containing a summary of the discussion and recommendations that will be adopted by the experts on the final day of

⁴ *Participation of Women in Political Life: An assessment of developments in national parliaments, political parties, governments and Inter-Parliamentary Union, five years after the Fourth World Conference on Women*. Series "Reports and Documents" No. 35, Inter-Parliamentary Union, Geneva 1999.

the meeting. The report will be made available at the 50th session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

V. Profile of the Participants

The Expert Group Meeting will be attended by 12 experts appointed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The expert group meeting will also be attended by observers from Governments, the United Nations, inter-governmental organizations, nongovernmental organizations and academia.

In selecting the experts, the criteria of geographical and gender balance will be taken into consideration. Experts will include academics and practitioners from relevant fields, in accordance with the objectives identified above. The United Nations will provide travel and daily subsistence allowance to the experts.

VI. Documentation

The documentation for the meeting will include:

- A consultant's paper commissioned by the Division for the Advancement of Women, outlining the major issues to be discussed;
- Papers prepared by experts on specific issues or case studies in line with their expertise;
- Papers prepared by observers.

VII. Organization

The meeting will be organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs in collaboration with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). The ECA will also host the meeting.

The meeting will be conducted in English and the documentation will be in English.

The meeting will meet in plenary and in working groups. In an opening plenary meeting, background presentations will create a conceptual framework for discussions. The plenary will be followed by an in-depth discussion of specific issues in working groups.

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