

**Division for the Advancement of Women
United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs**

**in collaboration with
the United Nations Regional Commissions
ECA, ECE, ECLAC, ESCAP and ESCWA**

Expert Group Meeting

**The role of national mechanisms in promoting gender equality and the
Empowerment of women: Achievements, gaps and challenges**

**Hosted by the Government of Italy
Rome, 29 November to 2 December 2004**

**Summary of Opening Statement
H.E. Ms. Stefania Prestigiacomo
Minister
Ministry of Equal Opportunities**

During the coming days we shall be preparing for the 49th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women that will take place ten years after the Fourth World Conference on Women. This event represents an essential step for the assessment of the achievements in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, and the new and advanced plans formulated by the international community and individual Member States over the last decade. Moreover, it will provide an opportunity to evaluate possible future initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women.

This is an extremely significant issue, as it aims at analysing the different national pathways followed by individual Member States, based on their local situations that are quite varied, and identifying common denominators and similar trends as well as “good practices” that have produced positive results and may be applied to other contexts.

This is a very interesting subject, but I know, it is also remarkably complex. In fact, women in different countries live in quite different conditions, and what is most important, wealthy nations on one hand and less developed ones on the other, have extremely different problems and needs to address.

In the northern part of the world, including Italy, we focus on issues such as the presence of women in economic and political decision-making processes, equal opportunities in the employment system and policies aimed at promoting the reconciliation of work and family life.

The Italian contribution shall deal with the above-mentioned subjects. The ongoing and already implemented projects and initiatives aimed at increasing the political participation of women shall be illustrated. We have amended our Constitution and are modifying our electoral laws with a view to promoting equal opportunities and have implemented measures to address the employment needs of women. At present, our Parliament is considering some measures to provide early childhood services to be adapted to meet the needs of modern households, taking into account, the working time and needs of women.

The debate on empowerment and gender equality in the northern part of the world focuses on the aforesaid issues. However, we know that women in developing countries are faced with extremely different problems, which sometimes become real international emergencies.

Such problems include the violation of fundamental human rights: in fact, women's rights are too often violated, including the right to health, conscious and safe maternity in terms of health protection, the right to one's body inviolability, in particular, I am referring to the phenomenon of genital mutilation, as well as the right to personal freedom, freedom of expression and the right to full equality in terms of civil and political rights.

We know that, in the Southern hemisphere of the world, women represent the weakest links in poverty and violence chain often characterising life in developing countries. We know that women have no food, although they are often in charge of cultivating the land and providing for their children. We know that half a million women die, from delivery; we know that more than 60% of those infected by HIV/AIDS in Africa are women, and this percentage is increasing. We know that hundreds of thousands of women, often minors, are purchased and sold as slaves for prostitution purposes in their countries of origin and taken to the West by traffickers in human beings.

We are aware that very strong social cohesion is needed to tackle and solve this problem. In its fight against such international trafficking in modern slaves, Italy has recently adopted new and more effective measures, focusing on both suppression of the problem and victims rehabilitation.

Hence, in the international community, there are advanced areas where an improvement of the conditions of women is required within an existing juridical equality and protection framework, as well as crisis areas, where fundamental rights of women and human beings in general, are challenged. In such areas, action and the prevention capacity should be stronger, while respecting local traditions and cultures.

International organisations, and the United Nations in the first place, play a crucial role in addressing such huge challenges involving women throughout the world. In spite of important achievements and progress made, a lot remains to be done. And women are smart and strong enough to face such challenges successfully.