

Further Actions and Initiatives towards Gender Equality:  
Perspectives from the United Nations

Statement by  
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at  
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Mr. Harada, Deputy Director-General of the Cabinet Office,  
Mr. Jigima, Deputy Governor,  
Hon. Dr. Ing Phavi,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished Panelists,  
Distinguished Participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour and privilege to have been invited to participate in this year's Policy Dialogue on Gender Equality entitled "Further Actions and Initiatives towards Gender Equality." I thank the conveners of the symposium, the Gender Equality Bureau of the Cabinet Office of the Government of Japan, for organizing this important and timely event.

Earlier this year we celebrated the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Fourth World Conference of Women—which took place in Beijing in 1995. I understand that there are many in this audience who participated in that conference. The Conference, the largest in the history of the United Nations, advanced the global campaign for gender equality, a principle which is embedded in the Charter of the United Nations. As we celebrated the tenth anniversary we reflected on the journey we had traveled starting with the first United Nations World Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975, through Copenhagen, Denmark in 1980 and Nairobi, Kenya in 1985. We recalled with pride the historic Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against women, popularly referred to as the international bill of women's rights, which enshrined women's rights in a legally binding instrument. We also noted with much appreciation the push for gender equality by other UN conferences and summits of the 1990s.

At the Beijing conference, 189 governments explicitly acknowledged that women's issues were not limited or specific to women only; rather they affect society as a whole and should be integrated in all aspects of life. Thus the Beijing Declaration and

Platform for Action now constitute the blue print for the advancement of women, providing a yardstick by which progress may be measured.

Distinguished Participants,

On the occasion of the ten-year anniversary of Beijing, the 49<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women undertook a comprehensive review and appraisal 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”. [ The review and appraisal conducted at the 49<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on the Status of Women highlighted significant but uneven national achievements in relation to the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session. A growing number of countries developed and implemented national gender-sensitive policies and programmes in economic, social and political spheres. Many countries successfully adopted gender mainstreaming approach towards the implementation of programmes and policies designed for the empowerment of women.

The Commission welcomed progress made thus far towards achieving gender equality and stressed that challenges and obstacles remained. Most importantly, it stressed the importance of undertaking further action to ensure the full and accelerated implementation of the goals and objectives of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome document of Beijing+5. It also called upon the United Nations system, international and regional organizations, and all sectors of civil society, including non-governmental organizations, as well as women and men, to fully commit themselves and to intensify their contributions to this implementation.

The review and appraisal identified the following as areas where progress had been made:

- Changes in law and policy. In many countries such change had been accompanied by institutional change as well. Within the decade many countries had established national mechanisms to deal with gender equality-related actions, or strengthened existing ones by raising their profile or their status, expanding or specifying their mandates and strengthening their financial and human resources. The discussion on the role of national machineries has been expanding and shifted from a focus on women-centered issues to a focus on gender equality issues. Japan’s national machinery was markedly strengthened by the establishment of a Council for Gender Equality and the Gender Equality Bureau with the Cabinet Office in 2001. National machineries for the advancement of women have been instrumental in shaping development policies and programmes by incorporating gender perspectives into national and sectoral plans and budgeting. A number of other institutional mechanisms for promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment at the national and regional levels have included gender equality commissions or committees, advisory groups, ombudspersons for gender equality, parliamentary caucuses and gender focal points in governmental offices and in

line- ministries.

- Another area where progress had been reported was the participation of women in the economy through comprehensive national employment strategies, employment creation, and micro-credit and small business schemes. However, women's economic contributions to societies and families are still often unrecognized and undervalued, and women's productive work is all-too-often hampered by the differential burden of reproductive work on women that is often not shared by the male members of their households. Increasing numbers of women have been entering the workforce worldwide. This has led to the improvement in their income security and to their standing in society. In this respect, the positive impact of globalization has generated employment opportunities for women on an unprecedented scale. From all corners of the world, we hear of success stories of using micro-credit and microfinance to advance women's empowerment, albeit at the local level. Issues once virtually ignored, like those involving paid and unpaid work, are now being recognized and even addressed in national development agendas.
- Progress has been realized in women's and girls' education world wide. According to the United Nations Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Parity, primary school gross enrollment rates rose in all regions of the world between 1990 and 2000. Moreover, all regions except South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa had enrollment ratios close to parity. More girls have completed secondary education, and the percentage of those continuing on to university has increased. Furthermore, research consistently shows that more education leads to improvements in health and economic status of women and a reduction in risk behavior, as well as to greater well-being of their children.
- At the international level, we see an increase in efforts to stop violence against women, in particular domestic violence. Indeed, in recent years Member States of the United Nations have increasingly demonstrated willingness to adopt measures to end violence against women, especially domestic violence, an area which has previously all too often been dealt with as a private matter in which the State did not interfere. Increasingly, governments recognize that all forms of violence against women are unacceptable and constitute grave violations of the human rights of women. Developments at the national level, such as the comprehensive Law for the Prevention of Spousal Violence and the Protection of Victims adopted by the Japanese government in 2001, are especially encouraging.
- Women's role in peace and security is being increasingly recognized. The landmark Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, adopted in 2000, fundamentally changed the perception of women from exclusively as victims of war to recognizing their roles as active participants - peacemakers, peace-builders and negotiators. Since its adoption, resolution 1325 has been instrumental within the UN system itself to mainstream gender concerns into all aspects of peace and security. My Office, together with the Inter-agency

Task Force on Women, Peace and Security, and with contributions from 37 UN entities, developed a system-wide action plan for the years 2005-2007 for the implementation of the resolution. The plan contains concrete strategies, actions and programmes to advance the role of women, support efforts by Member States and civil society, and strengthen the commitment and accountability of the UN system at the highest levels.

- There has been an increase in mechanisms to protect and promote the human rights of women, including the adoption of the Optional Protocol to the CEDAW Convention. Today, 180 Member States are parties to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The Optional Protocol entered into force in 2000 and is ratified by 72 State parties. The Protocol offers individual women an avenue for defending their rights when the possibilities at the national level are exhausted. A significant number of states have incorporated CEDAW into their Constitutions.
- We are witnessing a growing number of programmes aimed at forging partnerships with men and boys by raising awareness among them about existing inequalities and the need to break down traditional gender stereotypes. In some countries, men are encouraged to change attitudes by taking parental leave and get involved in actions to prevent violence against women and trafficking.
- Greater attention is being paid to the participation and representation of women in decision-making processes at all levels, including by setting targets or quotas for women in employment and political participation. As of 31 October 2005, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, women's share in national Parliaments was 16.1 per cent of all seats. The introduction of quotas has enabled a total of 7 developing countries, with Rwanda in the lead, to rank among the 17 top performing countries with more than 30 per cent of women parliamentarians. It is remarkable that in 2004 of the 58 countries that held elections for the Lower Houses of Parliament, 49 showed an increase in the percentage of women. The biggest regional change entails the doubling of the percentage of women MPs in the Arab world (from 3.5 per cent to 7.7 per cent). I am pleased to note that the Government of Japan raised the target for women's representation in national advisory councils and committees from 20 to 30 per cent once the goal of 20 per cent was reached in 2000. It is also important to acknowledge the positive incremental trend in terms of women's political participation at the local level. Good governance at the local level enhances the quality of development in a country. In some cases, women's participation at local levels of decision-making has provided a stepping stone toward women's political participation at the national level. In accordance with data collected by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in 2001 in thirteen countries from South Asia and the East Asia and the Pacific sub-regions, the number of women in local governments range from a high of 33 per cent to a low of 2 per cent, and are in all cases higher than the number of women in central governments in the respective countries.

Madam Chair,

These developments, no doubt, are encouraging and we are rightly proud of the gains made by women world-wide. Yet we are fully aware that we have a long way to go to achieve the goals of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Thirty years after the first World Conference on Women in Mexico and ten years after Beijing, women continue to face formidable challenges:

For example

- Women constitute the majority of poor;
- Violence against women continues unabated. They continue to suffer from gender-based violence and abuse during wars and carry the main burden for ensuring the survival of their families;
- Women's share of unemployed and illiterate is shockingly large;
- Discrimination in law, policy and practice continues to deprive women of their human rights.
- Women still are a minority in positions of power.
- Public attitudes towards the advancement of women and gender equality have not changed at the same pace as policy, legal and institutional frameworks;
- Stereotypical attitudes and discriminatory practices persist.
- Women's mortality rates are still unacceptably high in most regions;
- Prevalence of HIV/AIDS and vulnerability to infection increases among women;
- Trafficking in women and girls is on the increase;

Let me review some of these challenges in more detail.

In spite of the global pledge to fight poverty, we see a growing number of *women in* poverty in developed and developing countries. Clearly, the face of poverty today is most often female. In their responses to the 10-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action earlier this year, the overwhelming majority of countries identified women in general, and indigenous women, women in rural areas and women single parents in particular, as constituting the majority within the poorest groups of the population. Almost half of the countries responding acknowledged the feminization of poverty.

The proliferation since the end of the Cold War of internal or civil conflicts as well as of small and light weapons has had important implications for women. In the 1990s, rape was increasingly used as a weapon of war, and gender-based violence including rape and sexual assault became a feature of many armed conflicts. Women's lives are violated or lost due to other forms of violence, not only during armed conflict, but also in times of peace, or in their own homes. The exponential growth of trafficking in humans, in particular of women and girl-children, is alarming. Despite the concerted efforts aimed at combating the practice of human trafficking at the national, regional and international levels, women are all too often the ones who fall prey to cross-border trafficking, often for the purposes of forced prostitution and are doubly victimized when

they are treated by state authorities as illegal migrants and criminals. The root causes of trafficking in women and girls, including poverty, displacement, discrimination and gender-based violence should be addressed.

Madam Chair,

Three decades of innovation, experience and activism since Mexico have shown that achieving the goal of gender equality is possible. Many practical steps have been developed to mainstream gender in policies and programmes, reduce gender inequalities in all spheres and empower women and enhance their contributions to peace and development. Yet gender inequality is deeply rooted in societal institutions, entrenched attitudes and roles. This goes beyond a piecemeal rectification of different aspects of inequality and requires a transformation in the way societies conceive and organize women's and men's roles, responsibilities and control over resources. It requires a fundamental transformation in the distribution of power, opportunities and outcomes for all men and women.

Recognizing the complexity of the tasks at hand, the world leaders at the 2005 World Summit Outcome in September reaffirmed that the full and effective implementation of the goals and objectives of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly was an essential contribution to achieving the internationally agreed development goals. Importantly, the Summit Outcome explicitly stated that *progress for women was progress for all*. The leaders of the world resolved to eliminate pervasive gender discrimination by:

1. eliminating gender inequalities in primary and secondary education;
2. guaranteeing the free and equal right of women to own property and housing;
3. ensuring equal access to reproductive health;
4. promoting women's equal access to labour markets, employment and labour protection;
5. ensuring equal access to productive assets and resources, including land, credit and technology;
6. eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls; and
7. Increasing women's representation in Government decision-making bodies.

Madam Chairperson.

While the continued reaffirmation of commitments to the advancement of women and to the elimination of gender-based discrimination is encouraging, the commitments contained in the Outcome Document are not new. What needs to be done in order to achieve gender equality is to translate the global commitments into policy at the national level and ensure that the policies are fully implemented. It is not enough to have *de jure*

equality. Women want *de facto* equality. The lofty ideals of the Beijing Platform ring hollow for a woman living in abject poverty, lacking access to education, employment, justice and healthcare; daily facing widespread violence and de facto discrimination and with no voice in local and national decision making.

What needs to be done by governments, international organizations, civil society or individuals in order to achieve these goals? The necessary commitments have been articulated. They need to be followed by action and all actors must be creative in seeking ways to translate these commitments into actions, taking into account the particular national contexts. Essential for this transformation are:

First, accountability – women need to hold Governments who have the primary responsibility for achieving gender equality, as well as all other stakeholders, accountable for the commitments made in international fora and on paper: it requires establishing a monitoring mechanism preferably at the Cabinet level; regular/periodic reporting to the national legislature on the implementation of commitments by the different ministries and national institutions; and performance evaluation.

Second, strengthened partnerships – among governments, intergovernmental organizations, private sector and civil society. Women must bring everybody on board to support the common cause of gender equality. It is our task to show to the world the full extent of women's contributions to the well-being of society.

Third, adequate resources. Sufficient resources—financial, human and technical—must be allocated to the achievement of gender equality. Financing for interventions to achieve gender equality is crucial and gender budgeting contributes to this goal.

Fourth, a new political process to accelerate and intensify the implementation of the Beijing commitments as requested by the Declaration adopted at Beijing +10. Three decades of activism have stimulated the development of international norms and standards, and provided momentum for the creation of national machineries for the advancement of women. We must re-direct this energy and political will from norm setting to the practical implementation of the Beijing Platform by using the momentum provided by the Summit Outcome.

Distinguished participants,

Having traveled this far, we must consolidate gains and not lose momentum. Now is not the time to tire or tarry. We must collectively push on towards the goals so eloquently outlined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and re-iterated in subsequent international fora. This decade should be the decade of action for gender equality. I strongly believe that today's generations will see a gender equal society provided that we start acting now and acting together.

Thank you for kind attention. I wish you all a productive and constructive discussion.

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