

As delivered

**Opening Address
by
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on
Gender equality and the Millennium Development Goals
at
International Model United Nations Conference
The Hague, Netherlands, 23 January 2006**

Madam Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Dear Delegates,

Thank you very much, Madam Chairperson, for your kind words of introduction. I am the Special Adviser of Mr. Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary-General, on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women. As the title suggests, I advise the Secretary-General on gender issues and issues of particular concern to women and girls so that their needs, interests and aspirations can be taken into consideration and be fully integrated into the overall policy direction and programmes of the United Nations.

I am delighted to address this important Conference on Gender Equality and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Thank you all for your keen interest in the work of the United Nations on gender equality and the Millennium Development Goals. It is particularly encouraging for me to see that your generation shares a common commitment to ensuring that gender perspectives are fully integrated in all of the MDGs.

I take this opportunity to thank the organizers of this event for the excellent organization which has brought so many young people from different countries to participate in this Model UN. I also extend my appreciation to the Government of the Netherlands and the city of The Hague for hosting this International Conference and for the warm hospitality extended to us.

The United Nations has been a unique forum for global policy-making on development and gender equality from its very inception. Its Charter makes international economic and social cooperation a centrepiece of the UN agenda and proclaims gender equality as a fundamental human right. The commitments made in the Charter have been strengthened over the past three decades, from the first World Women's Conference held in Mexico in 1975 to subsequent conferences in Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985, the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

The Beijing Conference resulted in a landmark agreement in the history of the Organization, by 189 governments to improve the status of women worldwide. This agreement is known as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It outlines concrete actions to be taken in 12 critical areas in order to achieve gender equality. In 2000, a Special Session of the General Assembly, the twenty-third special session (commonly known as Beijing + 5) adopted an Outcome Document, reflecting issues emerging after Beijing. This document supplements the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

In 1979, the U.N. adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). By ratifying CEDAW, 180 countries have thereby committed themselves to accept it as part of their national laws. Often described as the international bill of rights for women, CEDAW provides for women's equal enjoyment with men of civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights. It is unique in establishing legal obligations for States Parties to ensure that discrimination against women does not occur either in the public or in the private sphere.

Therefore, we can comfortably say that the Beijing Platform for Action, the Outcome Document of Beijing + 5 and the CEDAW Convention are the main political and legal pillars for action by Governments, civil society and international organizations, including the United Nations, to achieve gender equality.

Together with outcomes of other major UN conferences and summits held in the 1990s and early 2000, these documents laid the foundation of a new vision of the world. A world free of abject poverty and a world in which all children – girls and boys – are educated. A world in which women and men have equal opportunities to contribute to and share in their country's prosperity and in which better health care for mothers and children removes the shadow of illness and death from childbirth and childhood. A world in which each generation hands on to the next a healthy environment with the resources that will meet the needs for a happy, safe and productive life.

It sounds Utopian. And yet the world's leaders signed up in 2000 to a Millennium Declaration which became an inspiration and basis for a set of eight tough but realistic goals – the Millennium Development Goals - which if they were met would move us very much nearer to making this vision a reality. The Millennium Development Goals which included some goals and strategies of the Beijing Platform offer a set of measurable goals and targets. They are also an important strategic opportunity to integrate the concerns of the Beijing Platform into a wider development policy agenda. However, they do not replace the goals and strategies set forth in the Beijing Platform for Action.

The Millennium Development Goals call for specific action. Goal 1 calls for halving extreme poverty and hunger by year 2015. Goal 2 calls for achieving universal primary education for all girls and boys. Goal 3 calls for promoting gender equality and empowerment of women. Goal 4 calls for reducing child mortality by two thirds. Goal 5 calls for reducing by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio. Goal 6 calls for halting and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other infectious diseases. Goal 7 calls

for ensuring environmental sustainability by halving the number of people without access to safe drinking water and achieving a significant improvement in the lives of 100 million slum dwellers by year 2020; and finally Goal 8 calls for developing global partnership for development.

The establishment of the specific Millennium Development Goal on gender equality and the empowerment of women (Goal 3) highlights the importance of renewed commitments to reduce the gender gap. While Goal 3 on gender equality has value in itself, gender equality and women's empowerment are central to the achievement of all the Millennium Development Goals. Achieving gender equality is an important prerequisite to fostering economic growth, poverty eradication and sustainable development. Any report you read about poverty will show that the majority of the poor are women – in fact you must have heard of the expression “poverty has a female face”. Similarly, the majority of the illiterates are women, and so are those infected with HIV/AIDS and other killer diseases. So women's empowerment whether through access to work, rights to own property and land, political representation and safety from violence inevitably leads to the achievement of the MDGs.

Enhanced empowerment of women leads to better awareness of child health issues and reduction of maternal mortality (Goal 4) and child mortality (Goal 5). The latter, which accounts for 11 million deaths every year, is highest among families with large numbers of children and among young mothers.

HIV/AIDS is now the number one killer in Sub-Saharan Africa, affecting in particular young women and girls. It is estimated that, 15 to 19-year-old girls are five or six times more likely to be HIV positive than boys of the same age. Countries with the largest gaps in gender equality, for example, low girls schooling and urban women's unemployment have experienced the fastest growth rates of HIV/AIDS infection. Women's empowerment - access to opportunities, human rights and having a voice in decision making, is thus critical to reducing HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and other diseases, as stipulated in MDG 6, and for ensuring sustainable development according to MDG 7, for example through improving access to water and sanitation.

A range of countries have demonstrated that gender equality and women's empowerment are central to development and the achievement of all the Millennium Development Goals. Moreover, available evidence shows that societies that discriminate against women pay a significant price in terms of lower quality of life, slower economic growth and development and weaker governance. Development policies and actions that fail to take gender equality into account or that fail to enable women to be actors in those policies and actions, are likely to have limited effectiveness and serious costs to societies.

Reflecting this understanding, at the World Summit held in New York in September 2005, Heads of State and Government resolved to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable. They reaffirmed that progress for women is progress for all and that by fulfilling the commitments set out in the Beijing

Declaration and Platform for Action as well as those made at the Beijing + 5, Member States would be able to make substantial progress towards achieving the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals.

Because of their specific targets and timelines, the MDGs have become an important yardstick for development. Therefore, it is all the more urgent and important that they reflect development for all – men and women alike.

Since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Millennium Declaration, progress has been made both in achieving MDGs and gender equality. Economic development lifted millions out of poverty. Average per capita incomes rose by more than 21 per cent. With 130 million fewer people living in extreme poverty in 2001 than a decade before, the proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day declined from 28 per cent to 21 per cent. The rate of undernourishment declined by 3 per cent and under five years mortality dropped from 103 per 1,000 births to 88. Life expectancy rose from 63 to 65 years. An additional 8 per cent of developing world population gained access to safe drinking water and 15 per cent to basic sanitation services.

In most regions of the world, women live longer and healthier lives; they are better educated and have better access to employment. In most countries, Governments, in cooperation with civil society, promoted policy reforms, improved laws and established national policies and strategies for gender equality. The human rights of women are better protected and local laws are more aligned with international and regional human rights conventions and agreements. This is good news.

However, despite these positive global trends, there are vast differences across and within regions and countries. For example, in the area of poverty eradication, most progress has been achieved in East Asia and South Asia, home to China and India while the decline in absolute poverty has largely bypassed several developing regions, especially Sub-Saharan Africa. This and some other regions made little progress or even experienced reversals in several areas.

Yet not a single country can claim to having eradicated discrimination. In all regions, there is a disconnect between commitments for gender equality made at the international level and translation of those commitments into policies and programmes at the national level. The persistent, and in some cases increasing, incidence of violence against women, the under-representation of women in decision-making in all areas and at all levels with only 15.7 per cent in national parliaments; the lack of access of many women to basic reproductive health services resulting in annual death toll of 600,000 women from pregnancy and childbirth related complications, and the fact that women are disproportionately affected by poverty, are unacceptable.

In addition, over the past decades, new challenges for women's empowerment and gender equality have emerged which need to be addressed, for example more women are affected by HIV/AIDS than men, negative effects of globalization affect more

women, trafficking of women and children increases and is estimated at 2,000,000 persons annually; and information and communication gender gap is growing, particularly in developing countries.

It has been noted that progress in achieving MDG 3 on gender equality has been limited and uneven. The world is still far from achieving gender parity in national parliaments, and missed the target of eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education set for 2005 with 19 countries missing the target for primary education and 24 countries for secondary education.

Addressing these inequalities and building on the gains made, the world leaders at the 2005 Summit resolved to eliminate pervasive gender discrimination by:

- Eliminating gender inequalities in primary and secondary education;
- Guaranteeing the free and equal right of women to own property and housing;
- Ensuring equal access to reproductive health;
- Promoting women's equal access to labour markets, employment and labour protection;
- Ensuring equal access to productive assets and resources, including land, credit and technology;
- Eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls;
- Increasing women's representation in Government decision-making bodies,

To avoid missing the 2015 target date, the political will that led to the Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Declaration and the 2005 Summit Outcome must be summoned once again and followed by concrete action on the part of everyone: Governments of developing and developed countries; civil society; academia, including youth organizations; private sector; and international organizations. Developing countries should lead and own the effort to design their national MDG strategies and implement them, drawing in civil society organizations, bilateral donors, the UN specialized agencies, programmes and funds and international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The role of donors is particularly important: it is covered in MDG 8. Developing countries need help as they tackle the many development challenges.

The role of both my Office, the office of the Special Adviser on Gender Equality and Advancement of Women and of the Division for the Advancement of Women is to promote the effective implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome of Beijing+5 as well as gender aspects of the Millennium Declaration and the Summit Outcome. As part of our activities we coordinate and support the efforts of the UN system in integrating gender into the Millennium Development Goals. Advocacy for gender issues and the facilitation of gender mainstreaming in UN programmes and procedures is one of my major functions.

Dear Participants,

Last year, the United Nations celebrated its 60th Anniversary and the 10th anniversary of the Beijing Conference. We must acknowledge that although much has been achieved to advance the status of many millions of women, the aspirations and goals of the UN Charter and the Beijing Platform for Action are far from being realized. Through gender education in the widest sense and the joint efforts of Governments, NGOs, civil society, regional and international organizations to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, we have heightened awareness of women's issues world wide. The central role of gender in social and economic development is recognized and it is now acknowledged that progress towards gender equality will benefit all, men as well as women.

So what can we do together? We must continue to press all Governments to translate commitments to development and gender equality into reality. In this quest, the role of education is crucial. It empowers girls and women. Let us join forces to ensure that the vision of the Charter, the Beijing Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals moves forward towards reality. Let us leave here resolved to intensify our efforts, through education and working with you –our future generation, through youth organizations, to bring the message of gender equality - and its central objective of non-discrimination - to all members of our communities.

Thank for your attention.
