

Gender equality and women's empowerment in the new millennium

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**at the
Interfaith Institute - Woman: Her spiritual journey
Wisdom House, Litchfield CT
31 October 2004**

Thank you for the invitation to be present at this interfaith gathering. I regret that I have not been able to be with you for the entire session. I am honoured to make this presentation on the global situation of women, at this very important point in time – just prior to the ten-year review of implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in 1995.

The Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, pointed out recently that “we need an effective United Nations – one that reflects the world we live in today, and can meet the challenges we will face tomorrow.” In this context, I am particularly pleased to speak to you on the important topic of gender equality and women's empowerment since I believe that this is one of the major challenges facing the United Nations and the world today. Moving forward on gender equality and empowerment of women would have tremendous positive impacts on developments in all areas – peace and security, effective and democratic governance, human rights and poverty eradication. Put more dramatically, none of the goals of the United Nations in any of these areas will be met unless and until we address inequality between women and men.

This has been an exciting few weeks for women and the coming months will also be critical ones. As I am sure you all know, two women were recently awarded Nobel prizes. Ms. Wangari Maathai, Assistant Minister for the Environment in Kenya, was awarded the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize for her contribution to women's human rights, sustainable development and peace over more than two decades. She has taken a holistic approach to sustainable development and in her work highlighted the integral links between human rights, democracy and peace. Ms Maathai is the 12th woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. The Austrian novelist and playwright, Ms. Elfriede Jelinek, was awarded the 2004 Nobel Prize for Literature. Her works have denounced sexual violence. Ms. Jelinek was the 10th women to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Their awards are an illustration of the important leadership roles women play in the world today and offer much-needed inspiration for us all.

In his opening statement to the General Assembly of the United Nations this year, the Secretary-General focused on the rule of law as the all-important framework at national and international level. He reminded us that rule of law means first and foremost that no one is above the law and no one should be denied its protection. He also emphasized that rule of law as a concept is not enough: “laws must be put into practice

and permeate the fabric of our lives". Those who champion equality for women rely to a large extent on the power of the law, and the protection which it can offer, to overcome discrimination and disadvantage. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is the human rights treaty on the rights of women and is sometimes referred to as the international bill of rights for women. It has been used as the legal basis for furthering the rights of women in many countries.

A week ago, a high-level panel was held at the United Nations to commemorate 25 years of work to ensure ratification and implementation of the Convention, which was adopted by the General Assembly on 18 December 1979. Participants included another inspiring woman, the Governor-General of New Zealand and former Supreme Court Judge, Dame Sylvia Cartwright, who is a former member of the Committee. 179 States are now party to this international human rights treaty, and are obligated to translate it into practice. Adherence to the Convention and its implementation in practice, fosters a climate – both internationally and nationally - where violations of the rights of women will not be tolerated.

The Convention has been instrumental in shaping the legal and policy frameworks for promoting the human rights of women at both national and international levels. It has been an inspiration for women in all parts of the world. Women's groups and networks have effectively used the Convention to combat discrimination, including in the areas of violence against women, poverty, lack of legal status, inability to inherit or own property, and lack of access to credit. The Convention has had a positive impact on legal and other developments in support of gender equality in countries throughout the world. Provisions in Constitutions of many countries have been strengthened to guarantee equality between women and men and provide a constitutional basis for the protection of women's human rights; existing legislation has been brought into conformity with the principles and obligations set out in the Convention and new legislation drafted as needed; and judges have used the Convention effectively in their decision-making.

In early 2005 we will commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the First World Conference on Women held in Mexico in 1975 and the ten-year anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Ten years ago, 189 countries unanimously adopted the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action which is focused on the integration of women as full and equal partners in decision-making processes, and increased attention to their rights in all areas of development. With the adoption of the Platform for Action, Governments undertook to consider development issues from both women's and men's perspectives, before decisions were made and resources allocated, and to continue to carry out activities targeted to address specific gaps and inequalities between women and men.

There have been significant advances for women in many parts of the world in relation to health, education and employment over the past decade. However, 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; the persistence of discriminatory laws governing marriage, land, property and inheritance; and the fact

that women continue to be disproportionately affected by poverty, is unacceptable in this new millennium. In addition, new challenges for women's empowerment and gender equality have emerged over the past decade, such as combating HIV/AIDS; addressing trafficking in women and girls; and mobilizing the new information and communication technologies (ICT) in support of gender equality and women's empowerment.

Even in areas where progress has been made, there is still much room for improvement. For example, in many countries the gains made in terms of improved access of girls and women to education have not empowered women or translated into benefits in terms of increased employment opportunities. While access to health services has improved in many countries, in other countries women lack even the most basic reproductive health care. In some cases, women's increased access to employment is only to work of a part-time nature, and women's wages remain often significantly less than men's.

In this short address it is impossible to provide a comprehensive overview of progress made in implementing the Platform for Action. I would like to briefly outline the achievements made and some of the remaining gaps and obstacles in a number of critical areas, which I hope will illustrate the nature of the challenges facing us in our work for gender equality and empowerment of women.

Despite global recognition of the fundamental right of women and men to participate equally in political and public life, women are underrepresented at most levels of government and have made slow progress in attaining political power in legislative bodies. Today, the proportion of seats held by women in legislative bodies stands at 15.4 percent, and this is the highest world average reached to date. This figure continues a trend of gradual but sustained growth, but clearly the pace of change is far too slow. Despite the progress made, only 14 countries today have at least 30 percent representation of women in parliament, which had been established as a target for 1995. Ten years later this target has still not been reached.

In most of the 14 countries where the 30 percent target has been reached (namely, Rwanda, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Belgium, Costa Rica, Austria, Germany, Argentina, Iceland and Mozambique), some kind of affirmative action measure has been instituted. These can take the form, for example, of reserved seats in Parliament, or electoral candidate quotas endorsed by political parties.

It is encouraging to note that a number of post-conflict countries – Rwanda, Mozambique, South Africa, Namibia, Timor-Leste, Uganda and Eritrea - appear in the top 30 countries with regard to women's participation in legislative bodies, averaging between 25 and 30 percent of women legislators. Many of these countries have recognized the importance of including women in their reconstruction processes, and of their participation in new democratic institutions. In Rwanda women now hold almost 50 percent of seats in the national parliament, currently the highest percentage of women in parliament in the world.

Women's opportunities to exercise power are in many contexts greater at the local than at the national level. In India and France, policies to increase women's political participation in local elections led to significant increases in women's presence in local office. Since 1993, one-third of seats in local councils in India are reserved for women. Studies of women's participation in village councils report on the empowering effects for the women themselves as well as the positive impact of women's presence on local politics. Women's presence has made the councils more responsive to community demands for infrastructure, housing, schools, and health; helped improve the implementation of various government programmes; and increased the likelihood that other women also feel empowered and take advantage of state services and demand rights.

Latin America and the Caribbean has made the most noticeable progress of any region in the area of women's political participation. In only one decade, the number of countries with very poor representation of women went down from 20 to seven. The Latin American experience highlights the importance of quotas, although it is necessary to keep in mind that quotas do not automatically ensure women's equal representation in legislative bodies.

In some cases, the international community has played an important role in ensuring these advances. In others, women's groups within the country have been the most important actors in promoting women's empowerment and positive change in women's participation in political decision-making. By offering provisions for childcare and other forms of family support, some countries have also made the existing unequal division of family responsibilities between women and men less of an obstacle for women's participation in public life.

In 2006 the Commission on the Status of Women will consider in more detail the progress made in women's participation in decision-making. This review will take a broader perspective than participation in the executive and the legislature, but will also focus on women's participation in other key areas. We have, for example, too little information on women's participation in economic decision-making at different levels, in academia, in the media and in ministries dealing with critical areas such as health, education, and employment. An important challenge is improving statistics on women's participation in all areas of development and at all levels.

The issue of violence against women and girls must be considered one of the greatest challenges in the coming decade. Violence against women exists in epidemic proportions in many countries around the world. In surveys conducted in various countries, between 10 and 69 percent of women reported having experienced domestic violence. By region, 10 - 35 percent of women in Latin America and 13 - 45 percent of women in sub-Saharan Africa have experienced physical intimate partner violence at some time in their lives. Non-intimate partner sexual violence also shows high global prevalence, with at least one in five women suffering rape or attempted rape during her lifetime. Worldwide, it is estimated that violence against women is as serious a cause of death and incapacity among reproductive-age women as is cancer, and it is a more

common cause of ill-health among women than traffic accidents and malaria combined. The disempowering effects of violence against women are enormous.

Violence against women is accepted as the norm in far too many parts of the world – a private business, a normal occurrence in the relationship between a man and a woman, where the state, community, or family should not interfere. It is a gross violation of women's human rights and is widely recognized as having serious development impacts, including but not limited to negative impacts on women's health and wellbeing. Violence against women exists on a continuum, from domestic violence in the privacy of the home, to violence as a weapon of war, where rape and other forms of sexual exploitation committed against women are now acknowledged as a crime against humanity.

Violence against women cuts across socio-economic, religious, and ethnic groups, and across geographic areas. In many countries women are at risk of violence when carrying out essential daily activities – walking or taking public transport to work, collecting water or firewood - especially when these activities are undertaken early in the morning or late at night. Adolescent girls are also at risk of violence in schools, particularly in Africa.

The health-related, economic, and social costs of violence against women - on women themselves, on their families, and on social and economic development - are substantial. Most of the data that exist on the costs of violence refer to the experiences of industrialized countries such as Canada, United Kingdom, Finland, Australia, and New Zealand, where systems of information and services are well-developed. A few recent studies have, however, estimated the costs of violence against women in countries in Latin America. Canada has estimated, for example that the direct costs of violence against women – criminal justice and police costs and counseling and training costs, amount to over Canadian \$1 billion per year. This does not include the non-monetary costs of suffering, morbidity and mortality; the broader economic effects of absenteeism, decreased labour market participation and decreased productivity, or the broader social effects on interpersonal relations, such as the disempowering effects on the women themselves and the serious impacts on children.

The United Nations General Assembly has requested the Secretary-General to prepare a comprehensive study of violence against women in all its forms to be submitted for consideration in the autumn of 2005. This study will be critical in raising awareness of the extent and nature of violence against women as a serious human rights violation and a development issue; assessing the effectiveness of measures utilized to date; and highlighting the steps needed to eliminate violence against women.

The discussion of violence against women leads me directly into the next aspect I would like to raise –gender equality in the context of armed conflict and its aftermath. Over the past decade women and girls have become prime targets of armed conflict and suffered its impact disproportionately; particularly as gender-based and sexual violence have become weapons of warfare and are one of the defining characteristics of

contemporary armed conflict. Women and children also constitute the majority of the world's refugees and internally displaced persons.

Women and girls are vulnerable to all forms of violence, but particularly sexual violence and exploitation, including rape, mass rape, forced pregnancy, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, and trafficking. Sexual violence has been a strategy of armed conflict in virtually all recent armed conflicts. In post-conflict contexts, women are also extremely vulnerable to rape in refugee camps. One study found that 26 percent of Burundi women in a Tanzanian camp had experienced sexual violence as refugees. Easy access to weapons increases interpersonal violence, including domestic violence, which often continues, and may even increase, in the aftermath of conflict.

The Secretary-General recently stated: "The facts on the ground point to our collective failure in preventing such violence and protecting women and girls from the horrors of gender-based violence and heinous violations of international human rights, criminal and humanitarian law". One only has to look at the newspapers or turn on the television today to understand the devastating levels of on-going sexual violence against women and young girls in Sudan.

The health consequences for women and girls during conflict are enormous, particularly related to reproductive roles. A spokesperson of the International Committee of the Red Cross recently reported that around 25 percent of women in refugee camps are pregnant, and at great risk of maternal mortality because of inadequacies in meeting reproductive health needs. He provided the distressing example that the risk that a young girl in Sudan today will die in childbirth (1-in 16) is greater than her chance of completing primary schooling (1-in 100). Gender discrimination can also lead to inequitable distribution of food to women and girls, leading to malnutrition and other health problems. Severe mental and social stress can be caused by witnessing or directly experiencing rape, torture, death, and separation from and disappearance of loved ones.

Women's daily tasks as providers and caregivers become increasingly difficult and dangerous, especially as the availability of and access to public services and household goods shrink. Armed conflict forces women to take on more responsibilities for family security and livelihoods. Lack of land and property rights, however, constrains their efforts. Women and girls may also be pushed into dangerous illegal activities, especially with the increase in trafficking in post-conflict contexts.

Refugee, returnee and internally displaced women and girls suffer human rights abuses throughout their displacement, flight, in camp settings and resettlement. Difficulties faced by women and girls are not always identified and addressed in planning and management of camps. Increased participation of women in decisions regarding the organization of camps, the layout of shelters and facilities and the distribution of supplies is critical for reducing the risks women and girls face in camp situations.

Many women organize locally and regionally for conflict resolution and peacemaking as well as disarmament activities. Grassroots women's organizations have

organized across party and ethnic lines, advocating for peace, and have been active in reconciliation efforts. They have campaigned against small arms, participated in weapons collection programmes, and disseminated information on landmines. Women's groups and networks have also begun to work at regional and sub-regional levels. For example, the Mano River Women's Peace Network, which brings together women from Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, and has made a major contribution to peace and security in the sub-region, won the 2003 United Nations Prize for Human Rights.

Women's work in informal peace processes is seldom reflected in formal processes. Women are often excluded from formal processes because they are not decision-makers or military leaders or because it is assumed that they lack the necessary skills. If peace agreements do not explicitly address the importance of gender equality there can be difficulties in getting attention to the concerns of women in the reconstruction phase, for example in relation to human rights provisions in new constitutions, electoral processes, land reform and legislation on sexual violence.

In 2000, for the first time, the Security Council considered the issue of women, peace and security and adopted a pathbreaking resolution (resolution 1325) which outlined the steps needed for increasing the participation of women in all areas of work on peace and security, protecting the rights of women and girls and ensuring attention to their needs and priorities. This resolution has been translated into 60 languages and is used effectively, especially by civil society, to promote greater involvement of women and attention to their concerns and priorities in all areas of work on peace and security. While there have been significant achievements in the four years since its adoption, much more remains to ensure full implementation. Last week the Security Council commemorated the fourth anniversary of the adoption of resolution 1325 with an open debate. A large number of Member States, including all Security Council Members, reiterated their commitment to fully implementing the resolution. A Presidential Statement was adopted which calls for a number of practical steps by the United Nations and Member States to ensure that the participation of women is increased and greater attention is accorded to gender perspectives in all areas of peace and security work.

In a *New York Times* article in 2002, the Secretary-General of the United Nations noted that: "...today, as AIDS is eroding the health of Africa's women, it is eroding the skills, experience and networks that keep their families and communities going. Even before falling ill, a woman will often have to care for a sick husband, thereby reducing the time she can devote to planting, harvesting and marketing crops. When her husband dies, she is often deprived of credit, distribution networks or land rights. When she dies, the household will risk collapsing completely, leaving children to fend for themselves. The older ones, especially girls, will be taken out of school to work in the home or the farm. These girls, deprived of education and opportunities, will be even less able to protect themselves against AIDS...If we want to save Africa from two catastrophes (HIV/AIDS and famine), we would do well to focus on saving Africa's women."

It is estimated that almost 50 percent of those living with HIV and AIDS are now women. UNAIDS data shows that there is a similar pattern of HIV infection for women

around the world. The prevalence of HIV infection is highest in women aged 15-25 years, while it peaks in men between five to ten years later. A new epidemic appears to be emerging in some countries amongst older people (over 50 years), and particularly amongst women, with numbers increasing 40 percent in the last five years.

In addition to increased representation among victims, women are also disproportionately affected by the pandemic in many areas because of their caring roles. Women are often left with the sole responsibility for providing for the sick and dying. Women must, however, not be seen only as vulnerable. Women and girls are also actors and change agents. The active mobilization of women and support to their efforts can enhance more effective preventative strategies and appropriate approaches to address the consequences of HIV/AIDS.

The vulnerability of women and girls to HIV/AIDS is directly related to the relations between women and men and to the attitudes and behavior of men and boys, as well as to persistent stereotypes about masculinities and about what is appropriate and acceptable behavior for women, particularly in relation to reproduction and sexuality. The factors driving the epidemic are embedded in the power relations that define male and female roles and positions, both in intimate relations and in the wider society.

Male violence against women – based on existing inequalities and power disparities in societies – is one of the critical stumbling blocks in the development of effective prevention strategies for HIV/AIDS. In violent relationships, women and girls have little means of protecting themselves from infection.

Ideologies of masculinity and ‘manliness’ which encourage men to display sexual prowess by having multiple partners, by stressing aggressiveness and dominance and lack of responsibility in sexual relationships put men themselves, as well as their partners, at risk. In many parts of the world, for example in Brazil and South Africa, men’s groups and networks are challenging existing stereotypes and addressing men’s roles and responsibilities in sexual relationships as well as in the promotion of gender equality. Equitable and responsible behavior of men and boys will only increase if they can access appropriate information and support.

UNAIDS recently established a Global Coalition on Women and HIV/AIDS comprised of the United Nations and civil society partners to address the specific concerns of women and girls, and particularly their caring roles, as well as to develop ways to engage men and boys.

This brings us to the important question – why has there been so little change in some critical areas and very slow progress in others – particularly when we are increasingly aware that promotion of gender equality and women’s empowerment is not just important for women themselves, but is critical for effective development in all areas. Leaving out half the population will of necessity have negative impacts on development outcomes.

Among the main constraints to moving forward on gender equality and empowerment of women are deeply entrenched negative attitudes and stereotypes, which are institutionalized in society. Breaking down the discrimination and disadvantage that most women face in one way or another on a daily basis, requires tackling deeply entrenched values, norms and attitudes which work against women.

A further serious constraint is the lack of leadership and political will to ensure the necessary political changes and resource allocation. Gender equality and empowerment of women will require going beyond achieving equality in numbers of women, to a fundamental shift in the distribution of power, opportunities and outcomes for women as well as men. This requires attention to critical elements of rights, justice and freedom from the threat of violence or other forms of insecurity.

The required policy framework for gender equality and empowerment of women is already in place; it is not more recommendations that we need. The Platform for Action contains many critical commitments which have yet to be implemented at national level. In most cases the legislative changes, policies, programmes and activities which are needed to ensure full implementation of the goals of the United Nations on gender equality and the empowerment of women are already well known.

Positive actions have been taken in many countries with very good results. Efforts have, however, too often not been systematic and sustained. They have been ad hoc and marginal, and not developed on the basis of a deep understanding of how critical gender equality is for development. The good practice examples that do exist are not shared systematically and the spin-off effects are poor. A large gap therefore continues to exist between policy commitments made at the Fourth World Conference and actual implementation at national level. The challenge ahead is to get the job of implementation done.

What can be done to move forward? More than three decades of research, activism and innovation, have shown that achieving the goal of greater gender equality and empowerment of women is possible. It does, however, require explicit commitment, concerted action, adequate resources and clear accountability.

Two issues immediately come to mind as critical for improving implementation. Firstly, greater efforts are needed to engage and involve men and boys. Gender equality is not only important for women and girls. It should be of concern to men and boys, families, communities and nations. Promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment cannot be done in a vacuum; men and boys must be brought along in the process of change.

Secondly, there needs to be much greater attention to adolescent girls and boys. The empowerment of adolescent girls must be a priority in the new millennium. The vulnerability of the situation of adolescent girls, which I hope my address has illustrated, and the impact of the attitudes and behavior of adolescent boys in this regard makes this age-group critical. In addition, the sheer numbers of adolescents in many parts of the

world and the potential that exists for changing values, attitudes and behavior during this transition phase into adulthood, illustrates the importance of identifying their concerns and needs and addressing them specifically.

In addition, ensuring that the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is used more effectively at national, regional and international levels would also move implementation forward. The Convention remains a critical instrument in promoting gender equality and empowerment of women as it is the human rights treaty that addresses most comprehensively women's equality with men and non-discrimination in the civil, political, economic, social and cultural fields. Only 12 Member States of the UN have not ratified the Convention, including the United States. Good examples of the constructive use of the Convention to reduce inequality and empower women should be disseminated broadly and the Convention should be systematically used in policy dialogue with all States parties.

Establishing stronger partnerships with non-governmental organizations and civil society groups and networks at all levels could also have a critical impact on implementation. Women's groups and networks have played a very strategic role in moving the global agenda on gender equality forward, energizing the debates on critical areas and contributing to increased visibility and recognition of the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment for development. A great deal of the sustained attention and the achievements made over the past decades has been due to their efforts. Their role in advocating for and monitoring implementation of the commitments made by Governments has been particularly significant. Although women have traditionally found it easier to organize separately in support of the issues of concern to them, women are increasingly developing alliances with mainstream organizations or working within these organizations to bring greater attention to gender issues. Stronger partnerships among civil society and between Governments and civil society could significantly enhance implementation.

In addition, we should also effectively utilize a number of important opportunities that will present themselves over the coming year to revitalize the global movement for gender equality and empowerment of women.

The Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals represent one of these important opportunities. The establishment of the specific goal on gender equality and empowerment of women sent a strong message on the importance of education – highlighting that investing in girls' education is critical for girls themselves as well as for overall development, as well as the unacceptability of continuing inequalities in education. The indicators on the share of women in wage employment and the seats held by women in national parliaments, address the fact that, without equal opportunity in the labor force and an equal voice in national decision-making, gender parity in education is unlikely to empower women. While the separate explicit goal has an intrinsic value in itself, it is critical to understand that gender equality and women's empowerment are central to the achievement of all the Millennium Development Goals.

A second major opportunity will present itself early next year with the ten-year review of implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action to be which will focus on implementation at national level. The programme of work contains a number of high level panels and roundtables for the exchange of experience and good practice. A Secretary-General's report on implementation at national level will be prepared, on the basis of responses to a questionnaire, as well as other information submitted by Member States. To date a total of 123 responses to the questionnaire have been received, a roughly 60 percent response rate. The review and appraisal provides an excellent opportunity to exchange experiences on achievements, gaps and challenges and required action and to renew commitments. It will be critical that the outcome of this review feeds into the high-level event to be held in 2005 to review progress in achieving the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals.

In conclusion, I would like to say a few words on the role of women's organizations focused on religion and spirituality. As has been the case in most secular organizations, women in religious bodies have historically had to struggle for equality within these bodies. We are all aware of the efforts of individuals, groups and networks to bring gender perspectives to bear on the agendas of their organizations, for example the networks of women working for a feminist interpretation of the Koran. Women's have also worked actively to promote ecumenism – to bring women from different religious groups together, which this Interfaith Institute so well illustrates.

Women's religious groups and networks have also worked courageously to bring gender perspectives to political agendas. They have advocated unceasingly for equity and social justice in development, within their own communities and countries as well as globally. Women's religious groups have predominated among the active women's groups calling for social justice and equity in world economic development. A recent good example of this is the work done to incorporate gender perspectives to the preparations for the International Conference on Financing for Development in 2002, and the follow-up work currently being undertaken. Women's religious groups have also worked tirelessly at local, national, regional and international levels for peace and security, and are known for the critical role they have played in many parts of the world in promoting peace education, working to instill a "culture of peace" in the next generation. All these efforts make clear contributions to global peace, security and development.

This work will have increasing significance with the development of fundamentalisms of different types, including religious fundamentalisms, which threaten human rights, peace and security, and gender equality and the empowerment of women.

I would like to encourage you all to be actively involved in the preparations for the ten-year review and appraisal of the Beijing Platform for Action and the five-year review of the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals. And I would urge that you support full ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and use it effectively as a basic framework in your efforts to promote gender equality, women's human rights and the empowerment of women.

In the face of the enormous discrimination and disadvantage women still face in most parts of the world, and the serious consequences for women themselves and for development trends, it would be easy to become discouraged. However the strength, courage and hope of women around the world, and their determined efforts against all odds, should inspire our continued commitment and action. Each one of us has to deal with the challenge of inequality we face in our daily lives and to find ways, however small, to work in solidarity to eliminate the discrimination and disadvantage suffered by women in other parts of the world.

Thank you.