

**Presentation by Carolyn Hannan, Director  
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**At the meeting on “Human Rights for Women Worldwide:  
Update on the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women”**

**Organized by the Buffalo/Niagara Chapter Friends of Women’s Rights National Park Inc  
The American Association of University Women, Buffalo Chapter  
The League of Women Voters of Buffalo/Niagara, and  
The Friends of Women’s Rights National Historical Park**

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide some information on the work of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. I would like to express my appreciation to the Buffalo/Niagara Chapter; Friends of Women’s Rights National Historical Park and the League of Women Voters, Buffalo Chapter for extending the invitation to visit Buffalo. I want to also express my gratitude for the kind hospitality provided, in particular to Joan Bozer, Judy Weidemann, Marilyn Tedeschi and Joan Photiadis.

The Commission on the Status of Women recently celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. For the past 6 decades the Commission has systematically worked to promote gender equality and empowerment of women. Comprised of representatives of Member States, the Commission provides a critical global forum for sharing of experience and information and for adoption of new policy recommendations on gender equality and empowerment of women.

In its initial years, the Commission was focused on carrying out surveys and raising awareness of and documenting the situation of women around the world. From the beginning, It also gave great importance to the human rights of women. With the gaining of independence by many new states in the 1960s, the Commission began to give more attention to women in development and the situation of rural women. From the establishment of the Commission, non-governmental organizations were involved in its work, highlighting issues that needed to be addressed, providing critical information – particularly from grassroots levels, and monitoring the implementation of agreements reached at national level.

Thanks to the Commission and its partners, 1975 was declared the International Year of Women and the first UN World Conference on Women was held in Mexico. The establishment of the International Decade for Women (1976-1985) followed. The Commission was responsible for organizing and following up three further World Conferences on Women – in Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995. The global policy framework on gender equality and empowerment of women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, was adopted at the conference in Beijing. The Commission has systematically promoted and monitored the implementation of this policy framework through its annual sessions.

The Commission has effectively ensured attention to the human rights of women. It was active in highlighting women's rights in the development of the Declaration of Human Rights and advocated for a human rights treaty on women. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was developed in the Commission and adopted by the General Assembly in 1979. It entered into force in 1981. Today 185 States have ratified the Convention. The Convention requires that States Parties fulfil their obligations under the Convention by taking appropriate legal, policy and programme measures. A complaints procedure has also been adopted – the Optional Protocol to the Convention – which provides an additional means of recourse for women whose rights have been violated.

The Commission also plays an important catalytic role in promoting and monitoring the gender mainstreaming strategy adopted at the Fourth World Conference in Beijing in 1995. Gender mainstreaming requires that specific attention is given to the needs, priorities and contributions of women as well as men in all stages of planning, implementation and monitoring of policies and programmes, in all sector areas. The Commission plays a “watchdog” role in relation to implementation of this strategy in Member States, in United Nations entities and in other intergovernmental processes in the United Nations, such as the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly.

Each year the Commission reviews implementation of different critical areas for gender equality and empowerment of women at its annual sessions. It organized a major review of implementation five years after the Beijing Conference, held in the General Assembly in 2000. The Commission organized a ten year review in 2005. At the ten-year review the Commission noted that while there had been many achievements, such as the development of policies and legislation on gender equality and the establishment of a large number of national mechanisms – ministries, networks, etc, there were serious challenges in all areas covered in the Beijing Platform for Action, including underrepresentation in decision-making, inequalities in land and property rights, vulnerability to HIV/AIDs, horrific levels of violence, discrimination in education and employment and persistent negative attitudes and stereotypes. In the Declaration adopted at the ten-year review, the Commission noted that there is a huge gap between the policies adopted at global level and the implementation of these policies at national level. The Commission therefore called for accelerated implementation of commitments made. In 2006 the Commission decided to carry out annual reviews implementation of the policy recommendations it has adopted since Beijing. The Commission will select one critical area for review each session. The first review was held at its most recent session earlier this year, and focused on the recommendations it adopted on the “Role of men and boys in promoting gender equality” in 2004.

In adopting the themes for its annual sessions, the Commission takes into account the work programmes of other intergovernmental bodies in the UN, as a way to try to influence their work and ensure that they give appropriate attention to gender equality. For example, the priority theme of “Eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child” was chosen to feed into the follow-up to the World Summit on Children which will be carried out in the General Assembly this autumn. The theme for 2008, “Financing for gender equality and empowerment of women” will provide input into the preparations for the follow-up to the Monterrey Conference on Financing for Development, to be held in Qatar in 2008. The theme for 2009, “The sharing of

responsibilities between women and men, including caring in the context of HIV/AIDs” will feed into the follow-up in the General Assembly on the Action Plan on HIV/AIDS in 2009.

Since the Beijing Conference, the Commission has worked to become an important global forum for Member States to come together to discuss progress and identify remaining gaps and challenges and ways to address these. The Commission organizes interactive panels and dialogues to encourage sharing of Member States experiences, lessons learned and good practices. The Commission encourages high-level participation from capitals and a good number of Ministers of Women’s Affairs and high-level officials attend the annual sessions. Large numbers of representatives of non-governmental organizations from all parts of the world also participate. The most recent session, which focused on the priority theme: “Eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child”, was attended by 1,900 representatives of NGOs.

It is clear that the Commission on the Status of Women is increasingly seen as an important global forum on gender equality, as illustrated by the large numbers of representatives of Member States, United Nations entities and NGOs attending. In addition, organizations around the world are increasingly aware of the themes that the Commission is focusing on and address these themes in their own work. For example, the Meeting of Commonwealth Ministers of Gender Equality, held in Uganda earlier this year, focused on “Financing for gender equality and empowerment of women” to prepare for the next session of the Commission. Similarly, the OECD DAC GenderNet, meeting in Paris in July, organized a workshop on financing for gender equality. BRIDGE, an information-focused NGO, is preparing a publication on financing for gender equality for distribution at the Commission. The UN Interagency Network and the OECD DAC GenderNet are organizing a meeting on financing gender equality through multilateral organizations as preparation for the Commission. The World Bank will also discuss this issue at its forthcoming meeting for its External Gender Consultative Group later this year. The World Bank Senior Gender Adviser, noted in a recent article, that “financing gender equality,” the main theme of next year’s UN Commission on the Status of Women, is spot on”.

One of the issues I was asked to address in my presentation, was how can NGOs become more engaged in the work of the Commission. There are different ways NGOs from all around the world are involved. The Division for the Advancement of Women organizes an on-line discussion in June/July each year on the priority theme to be considered by the Commission. This year, 1,300 participants from all regions registered to discuss “Financing for gender equality and empowerment of women.” The report is available on the DAW website. The Division also organizes an Expert Group Meeting, bringing together a small number of recognized experts on the theme to be considered. NGOs are represented among the experts. The reports of these expert group meetings are also made available on the DAW website and provide an excellent introduction to the issues to be discussed at the Commission each year.

NGOs can also send written statements which are presented as part of the official documentation at the Commission. As mentioned, a large number of NGOs attend the sessions of the Commission and have a unique opportunity to attend all the meetings, lobby government delegations, exchange ideas and experiences with the large numbers of NGOs at the sessions, and attend the wide variety of panels and workshops organized in the margins of the Commission,

outside the official programme. NGOs organize around 150 such parallel events at each annual session. The NGO Committee on the Status of Women organizes a consultation day for NGOs attending the session, the Sunday before the opening of the Commission. This provides an excellent opportunity to get further information on the issues to be considered by the Commission, and to meet NGOs from all around the world. During the Commission the NGO Committee on the Status of Women also organizes daily briefings to keep NGOs abreast of the developments at the Commission.

NGOs in Buffalo have a unique opportunity to be involved in the work of the UN Commission on the Status of Women because of proximity to New York. NGOs must, however, have ECOSOC-accreditation to be able to attend. I understand that a number of NGOs already have this status and others are considering applying for this. I would encourage as many NGO representatives as possible to take the opportunity to attend as it provides a unique learning experience, as well as the opportunity to put forward your ideas and influence the global policy-making process on gender equality and empowerment of women.

Increasingly, NGOs from different parts of the world are looking for ways to ensure that they get full benefit from the opportunity to participate in the sessions. Organizations begin to prepare for the discussions on the priority theme the year before the Commission. They hold meetings and seminars, collect information and materials, and prepare their own materials on the theme. They come to the Commission well informed and with clear ideas on what changes they want to promote. Many also organize parallel event to put forward their viewpoints on the themes of the Commission or to raise other important issues.

With the increased focus of the Commission on implementation at national level, NGOs are also developing ways to ensure that there is follow-up to the policy recommendations after the Commission sessions. For example, a group of about 100 Anglican women from different countries underwent a preparatory programme for the recent session, attending workshops and panels. During the CSW they were provided with further briefings and support as needed to ensure that they could fully benefit from their participation. Following the CSW, efforts will be made to ensure that there is adequate follow-up at national level. This input of NGOs to ensure that the Commission has impact at national level is a very important contribution.

NGOs in Buffalo could do the same, for example in relation to the forthcoming 2008 theme of "Financing for gender equality and empowerment of Women" or in relation to the 2009 theme of "Sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caring in the context of HIV/AIDS" – which also promises to be a very exciting topic. Thematic discussions on, for example, the sharing of responsibilities between women and men, and the implications for gender equality and empowerment of women, could be held during 2008 to prepare for participation at the Commission in 2009. In this way, women and men in Buffalo would be engaged in dialogue on the issue, those attending the Commission would be well informed and better able to raise relevant issues. On return from the Commission, the participants could organize further meetings to discuss the outcomes and decide what actions could be taken in Buffalo to implement the recommendations of the Commission. When the Commission comes back to review these recommendations in 2-3 years time, NGOs in Buffalo would be able to report back on progress made.

Allow me to say a few words about the theme of the 2008 session, “Financing for gender equality and empowerment of women”. Although the Beijing Platform for Action, and outcomes of other meetings, made commitments on allocation of resources for gender equality and empowerment of women, the Commission has never specifically addressed this issue. As mentioned, it is also important that the Commission is considering the issue now as it can provide recommendations to the preparations for the large and important meeting on Financing for Development to be held in Qatar in 2008. The Expert Group Meeting on this topic, held in September in Oslo, and the reports of the Secretary-General which will be made available to participants at the Commission, have focused on a number of key issues related to financing. These include: the links between gender equality and macro-economic policies; gender equality and public finance management; resources for gender equality through development assistance; and funds provided through innovative means, such as foundations and the private sector. Focus is given to resource allocations for two particular target groups – the national mechanisms for gender equality and the women’s movement.

One critical issue which will be discussed at the Commission is the attention given to resources for gender equality in budgets at national and local levels, what is known as “gender-responsive budgets”. In more than 70 countries analyses of budgets have been carried out to assess the extent to which the needs, priorities and contributions of women are taken into account in allocating resources. Methodologies are being developed to ensure that it is possible to track the allocation of resources in support of commitments to gender equality. Increased attention is needed to the issue of measurement, since “what is treasured, is measured”. If there is no measurement of resource allocations to gender equality, and no accountability for identifying and addressing resource gaps, progress on gender equality and empowerment of women will be limited.

NGOs are heavily involved in this work – advocating for gender-responsive budgeting, using the outcomes of analyses to demand change, and educating the public on their rights to demand accountability in budget processes at both national and local levels. The impact of greater involvement of citizens, use of gender analysis, and greater transparency in processes, has led to results in some areas. Women at local levels in some countries have become more aware of their rights, of the accountability of public officials, and of the processes through which resources are allocated, and have made clear demands of local politicians for allocation of resources to services of importance to them and their families, such as health clinics, schools and water supplies.

Another interesting finding emerging from the preparations for the consideration of this theme at the next Commission is the fact that the funding situation for women’s NGOs and networks has reached crisis levels. Funding for the “women’s movement” in all parts of the world has decreased, in some places significantly, since the Beijing Conference in 1995. Many groups and networks are barely able to survive let alone work optimally. It is also interesting to note that the fastest growing funding source for women’s groups and networks is women’s funds – or funds set up by women for women. These women’s funds are often the only source of small amounts of funding - no longer provided by bilateral agencies or UN entities because of the high administrative costs – which are critical for many poor women around the world.

Similarly, the national mechanisms set up by Governments to promote gender equality and empowerment of women also suffer from a lack of resources. Many of these mechanisms have low status, unclear mandates and little political power, compounded by a serious lack of human and financial resources. This constrains their potential to play the essential role in advocating, advising, supporting and monitoring progress in promoting gender equality and empowerment of women. The situation of these national mechanisms is often similar to the situation of gender equality bodies in international and regional organizations, including the United Nations, as can be seen in the recent discussions on reform of the institutional arrangement for gender equality in the United Nations.

In preparing for the next Commission, NGOs in Buffalo could consider the extent to which gender analysis is utilized to ensure that the needs and priorities of both women and men are identified and addressed in budget processes at all levels. The situation of funding for women's groups and networks, and for meeting the basic needs of poor groups of women and girls, could also be investigated. Participation in the Commission could provide insights and ideas on how to address these issues "on the ground" here in Buffalo.

Finally, I would like to note that as well as following and contributing to the work of the Commission on the Status of Women, NGOs in Buffalo could also work to ensure that the legal framework or treaty – the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) - is ratified by the United States (which is currently one of very few countries that have not ratified) so that the Convention can also become a powerful instrument in promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women in this country, including here in Buffalo.

NGOs around the world continue to play a critical role in the work of the United Nations and in the work of the Commission on the Status of Women in particular. The inputs in terms of awareness-raising, advocacy, monitoring and demanding accountability make critical contributions. I would encourage NGOs in Buffalo to find ways to be more engaged in the work of United Nations, including through the Commission. If the Division for the Advancement of Women can support you in any way, we would be happy to do so.

Thank you.