

**Presentation by Carolyn Hannan,  
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Let me begin by thanking you for inviting me to this lunch and providing me the opportunity to share some thoughts with you. I have had very good contacts with the UN representatives of Soroptimist International for many years and it is a pleasure to expand my contacts with your organization. I understand there will be 35 representatives of your organization at the Commission on the Status of Women this year. This is very welcome as it shows the interest of your organization in the important work of the United Nations on gender equality and empowerment of women. I congratulate you on all the work you have done in support of women and girls, here in New York, in other parts of the US and around the world, including through your international project Homes for Hope in Sierre Leone.

Equality between women and men is critical for the achievement of the goals of the three pillars of the United Nations – development, peace and security and human rights. At the Millennium Summit in 2000, Heads of State from all parts of the world acknowledged that gender equality and empowerment of women are essential for the eradication of poverty and hunger and for development that is truly sustainable. One of the eight Millennium Development Goals that were established following this summit is focused specifically on gender equality and empowerment of women. Five years later, at the 2005 World Summit world leaders highlighted that “progress for women is progress for all”. These are powerful commitments, coming from world leaders.

The United Nations can be proud of its achievements in relation to its work in establishing clear mandates and global commitments on gender equality and gender justice. A strong global policy framework – the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – has been in place since 1995 to guide work at national level. The human rights treaty on gender equality – the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) – has been ratified by 185 States.

These strong mandates and norms at global level are the result of the focus in the United Nations on gender equality and empowerment of women since its establishment. A separate body was created already in 1946 to work on the “advancement of women”. The Commission on the Status of Women still meets today, here in New York, and is the leading body at global level on gender equality. As I am sure you are aware, the next session will be held two weeks from now – from 25 February to 7 March. From its inception, the Commission worked to collect and compile data on women’s situation around the world; to promote women’s human rights; and raise awareness of, and support for, their contribution to development.

The Decade for Women (1976-1985) and four world conferences on women (between 1975 and 1995) contributed significantly to raising awareness and commitment

to gender equality. An important breakthrough was the establishment of the strategy of “gender mainstreaming” in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, as it required attention to gender equality and empowerment of women by all actors in all sectors. Gender mainstreaming requires that Governments, United Nations bodies and other institutions give attention to gender perspectives in all areas of their work – on, for example, the economy, agriculture, statistics, energy, transport and health. This strategy has had a significant impact, even if implementation has not been as systematic and effective as could be desired.

Gender mainstreaming also meant that the promotion of gender equality should no longer be considered the exclusive responsibility of the Commission on the Status of Women in the United Nations. Other important bodies, such as the General Assembly and the Security Council, are also expected to consider the gender equality aspects of their work. It was because of the gender mainstreaming strategy that the Security Council was able to develop a strong resolution on women, peace and security in 2001, which has led to increased attention to the situation of women and girls in armed conflict and its aftermath.

### **The reality on the ground**

While much has been achieved at the policy level, the situation is not as positive if implementation on the ground is assessed. In 2005 a ten-year review of implementation of the recommendations in the Platform for Action revealed a huge gap between the global policies and actions at national level. Member States have not lived up to their commitments, and the United Nations has failed to deliver the necessary support to the Member States. The critical messages reiterated by world leaders in 2000 and 2005 – that gender equality and empowerment of women is essential for progress in other areas, and that progress for women is progress for all – have not been fully understood and acted upon.

The consequences of the failure to explicitly address gender inequality and injustice are devastating for women and girls in all parts of the world. This can be illustrated by the serious levels of violence against women - in domestic contexts as well as in situations of armed conflict - which is disempowering and life threatening; the persistence of trafficking, a modern form of slavery and torture; the high levels of maternal mortality – often because of inaccessible health services due to lack of basic transport - which is unacceptable in the age of space travel; the lack of access to the basic requirements for survival, such as land, property and economic resources; the continuing unequal access to education and employment; and serious under-representation in all areas of decision-making.

Just to give some quick examples in one area - women’s participation in decision-making - in 2007 only 16 percent of parliamentarians world-wide are women and there are no reliable statistics for women’s participation in any other area. In many countries, even developed countries, representation of women as heads of universities is less than

10 percent. In Norway, the percentage of women in corporate boards was so low that the Government recently threatened to legislate unless there was a significant improvement.

The human rights of women and girls in many parts of the world are systematically violated. Any serious development thinker/practitioner would have to recognize that this is not just devastating for individual women and their families but extremely serious for the achievement of the whole development agenda, and the achievement of universal human rights and peace and security.

### **What is being done to rectify this situation**

As I already mentioned, the Commission on the Status of Women has been working on gender equality and empowerment of women for over 60 years. Since the Fourth World Conference in Beijing in 1995, the Commission has increased its efforts to monitor implementation of global agreements at national level. The Commission plays an important role as a global forum for exchange and sharing of experiences, lessons learned and good practices. Member States increasingly share both achievements and gaps and challenges and the Commission is increasingly recognized as an important learning forum.

Each year the Commission focuses on one priority theme and adopts new recommendations for action to strengthen work at national level in this area. Last year, for example, the Commission considered “Elimination all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child”. This year the Commission will focus on “Financing for gender equality and empowerment of women”. And next year, the very exciting theme will be “Sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS”.

The Commission also reviews progress at each session in the implementation of agreed conclusions on a theme considered at an earlier session, as a means to address the gap between policies and action on the ground. At its coming session, the Commission will review the implementation of the recommendations it adopted on conflict resolution, prevention and peacebuilding in 2004.

### **The role of NGOs**

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been active in the United Nations work on gender equality since the establishment of the Commission in 1946. NGOs have played a critical role in highlighting issues for attention on the global agenda; providing critical information and data; supporting implementation on the ground; monitoring government action on global commitments; and supporting governments through partnering on critical issues.

The largest number of NGOs participate in the Commission on the Status of Women than in any other body in the United Nations. In 2007, for example, 1,900 NGO representatives attended the session of the Commission focused on the situation of the

girl child. NGOs are very active during the session, submitting written statements, making oral statements, organizing parallel events, and lobbying/advocating for particular issues. Prior to the sessions, NGOs participate in the in-line discussion and Expert Group Meeting organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women on the priority theme.

NGOs prepare very well for the Commission. The NGO Committee on the Status of Women and the Division organize two joint panels in the weeks prior to the session to stimulate discussion on the themes to be considered by the Commission. The NGO Committee also organizes a consultation day for NGOs from around the world held just prior to the session. Daily briefings are also organized during the session which provide both practical and substantive information. Caucuses are held on different themes.

A number of individual NGOs are undertaking impressive work in preparing for and following up participation in the Commission. For example, in recent years around 100 Anglican women from around the world have gone through a preparatory programme; been briefed and mentored during the session; and encouraged and supported to incorporate the recommendations from the Commission in their day-to-day work following the session. Other organizations are beginning to use a similar methodology. This means that NGO representatives are better prepared for participation; are clear about the changes they want to advocate for; and better able to follow-up to ensure change on the ground as a result of the work of the Commission.

NGOs can support the Commission in addressing the implementation gap by working to ensure the recommendations adopted have an impact at national level. NGOs should play a strong leadership role through advocacy, awareness raising, development of innovative methods and piloting of new approaches, and strengthened monitoring of government efforts to implement commitments. It is my hope that NGOs will develop innovative ways to incorporate the outcomes of the Commission into their day-to-day work and share their experiences and lessons learned.

We already have one emerging good practice in the work of the NGO Working Group on Girls. This group was very active in disseminating information about the priority theme of the Commission on the girl child in 2007, prior to the session. Since the Commission they have remained active in follow-up to the recommendations. They have translated the recommendations into “girl-friendly” language so that girls around the world can also know what the Commission discussed and agreed on, and they have developed indicators to assist different actors in assessing how well they are living up to the agreed recommendations.

## **Moving forward**

NGOs should continue to lead on critical issues of gender equality. NGOs, for example, played a lead role in placing violence against women on the global agenda and ensuring that the focus was maintained. As a result, the UN Secretary-General was

requested by Member States to prepare an in-depth study on violence against women, on the basis of which a strong resolution on intensifying action in this area was adopted by the General Assembly in 2006. As a further follow-up, the Secretary-General will initiate a multi-year campaign on violence against women which will increase the leadership of the United Nations in this area, increase advocacy and support development of partnerships at national level to eradicate such violence by 2015. There are a number of other critical areas where NGOs can show similar leadership, for example on gender perspectives on climate change (which the Commission is considering as its emerging issue this year) and in relation to women in decision-making (where progress will be reviewed in the 2009 Commission).

Given the gap between the policy commitments on gender equality made over the past six decades and actual implementation on the ground, it is clearly a development imperative to acknowledge and act on this. An important but simple framework for the achievement of gender equality and empowerment of women has been developed which can be utilized in all countries, in all policy areas and at all levels. It requires addressing the following elements, within a human rights framework: development of *capabilities* of women and girls through, for example health and education; increased access to *resources* for women and girls, such as employment, credit and land and property rights; strengthened *agency/voice* for women and girls, through for example increased access to information and to decision-making in all areas; and enhanced *safety and security* of women and girls, for example through eradication of violence against women. The successful utilization of this framework requires that we work together with men and boys. Gender equality cannot be achieved in a vacuum – men and boys must be involved in and influenced by the process of change for gender equality.

We should keep attention focused on the clear message of the Heads of State when they met in 2000 and again in 2005, and make governments accountable for upholding this commitment in practice: Gender equality and empowerment of women is essential for development in any area, and equality and justice for women is necessary for equality and justice for all.

Thank you.