

“United Nations efforts in protecting women's human rights”

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It is a great honour for me to speak today on the United Nations’ efforts to promote and protect women’s human rights, and I am pleased to be part of this celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10 December 1948. I congratulate the Committee on Teaching About the United Nations for organizing the conference and the UN Department of Public Information for co-sponsoring it.

Since its founding in 1945, the United Nations has been committed to the equality of women and men. The *Charter of the United Nations* is the first international agreement to reaffirm, in its Preamble, the faith of the peoples of the United Nations “... in the equal rights of men and women”. Article 1 sets out, as one of the purposes of the United Nations, the promotion and encouragement of the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction on grounds of “race, sex, language, or religion”.

Building on these commitments, over the past six decades the United Nations has continuously elaborated the substantive content of women’s human rights, and created mechanisms and processes to support implementation and monitoring of women’s enjoyment of their rights. The United Nations took the lead role in putting in place the global normative standards of equality between women and men, and the elimination of discrimination and violence against women and girls.

Three years after the creation of the United Nations, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* established the fundamental right of equality and non-discrimination as a corner stone of the international human rights framework. The Declaration’s core principles – that human rights are based on the ‘inherent dignity’ of every human person, with inalienable rights and freedoms, belonging equally to every person ‘without distinction of any kind’ – inspired and guided the subsequent standard-setting effort of the United Nations.

The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* constitutes the pinnacle of the United Nations’ standard-setting work on gender equality. It sets out, in legally binding form, a comprehensive legal framework for

women's equality and establishes a focused, women-specific human rights regime. Adopted by the General Assembly on 18 December 1979, the Convention now has 185 States parties which are obligated to translate its provisions into practice. Currently, there are eight Member States of the United Nations, including the United States, which have not yet ratified the Convention.¹

The Convention provides for women's equal enjoyment with men of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, and requires States parties to eliminate discrimination against women in the public as well as the private sphere, including within the family. It requires from States the practical realization of the principle of equality of women and men. Towards this end, States parties are mandated to pursue, 'by all appropriate means', and 'without delay', a policy of eliminating discrimination against women. Adherence to the Convention fosters a climate – both internationally and nationally - where violations of the rights of women will not be tolerated.

Accountability by States for adhering to their treaty obligations is ensured by a Committee of 23 experts, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which reviews reports that all States parties must present on a regular basis. In its concluding observations, the Committee identifies gaps in implementation and provides country-specific guidance on further steps required to accelerate compliance with the Convention's provisions.

In addition to this general monitoring mechanism, the *Optional Protocol to the CEDAW Convention* constitutes an opportunity for individual women, or groups of women, to seek redress for alleged violations of their rights under the Convention, once certain admissibility criteria are fulfilled. The Optional Protocol also gives the Committee authority to initiate inquiries into grave or systematic violations of the rights enshrined in the Convention. These procedures offer an international recourse for women who have been denied justice at the national level and are an additional impetus for States to ensure that adequate and accessible domestic remedies for violations of the rights of women are in place. The Committee has highlighted, through the use of the Protocol, the need for more effective national remedies for women and the need to repeal discriminatory laws, policies and practices.

Other human rights instruments also support the elimination of discrimination and the realization of the principle of equality of women and men. For example, the Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and on Civil and Political Rights obligate States parties to ensure the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of the rights enshrined in the respective instrument. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is particularly pertinent to the situation of girls, while the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which entered into force last year, sets out as one of the Convention's principles equality between men and women and devotes a specific article to women and girls with disabilities. The monitoring bodies under all these treaties

¹ [Member States that are not party to the Convention: Iran (Islamic Republic of), Nauru, Palau, Qatar, Somalia, Sudan, Tonga, United States of America. The Holy See is also not a State party. Cook Islands is a State party to the Convention, but not a Member State.]

regularly address the rights of women within the mandates provided. Human rights violations suffered by women have also been the subject of cases considered by some of these bodies under their complaints procedures.

The international legal framework contains several other instruments of particular relevance for the protection of the human rights of women. These include the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime; and a number of conventions adopted by the International Labour Organisation such as Convention 100 – on Equal Remuneration (1951); Convention 111 – on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) (1958); Convention 156 – on Workers with Family Responsibilities (1981); and Convention 175 – on Part-Time Work, (1994).

Several of the *world conferences held by the United Nations in the 1990s* were instrumental in enhancing visibility of women’s human rights. These conferences added important political commitments and policy recommendations for action that complement the international legal framework. In particular, the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna highlighted the need for the implementation of all human rights instruments relating to women, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing called for action to address the systematic and systemic nature of discrimination against women in order to achieve the full realization of human rights for all. The Beijing Platform for Action identified lack of respect for, and inadequate promotion and protection of, the human rights of women as one of the 12 critical areas of concern, and set strategic objectives and outlined detailed action for achieving them. Both conferences confirmed that the human rights of women and the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights and emphasized the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights by women and girls as a priority for Governments and the United Nations.

[In the *Millennium Declaration* of 2000, Heads of State and Government resolved to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, to combat all forms of violence against women and to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Commitments to gender equality and the promotion of the human rights of women were also included in the *2005 World Summit Outcome*.]

Policy discussions and decisions pertaining to women’s human rights are a regular part of the work of many of the *inter-governmental bodies of the United Nations*, including the General Assembly, the Commission on the Status of Women and the Human Rights Council. Issues such as violence against women in all its forms and manifestations, including trafficking in women and girls, as well as harmful practices, so-called honour crimes, and domestic violence, which were once perceived as private, domestic matters, are now openly debated in these global fora and condemned as violations of women’s human rights.

The United Nations *Security Council* set a milestone in 2000 when it held its first ever discussion on women and peace and security. In the resulting resolution 1325 (2000), the Council called for special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence in armed conflict, and to put an end to the impunity of perpetrators. Last June (2008), the Security Council reinforced this path-breaking step when it addressed sexual violence as an issue of international peace and security (resolution 1820).

Let me elaborate briefly on the issue of *violence against women* which is now recognized as a pervasive violation of women's human rights and a major impediment to achieving equality between women and men. Such violence is the subject of a comprehensive legal and policy framework at the international level, including international human rights treaties and other legal instruments, and documents emanating from United Nations conferences and summit meetings, and declarations and resolutions adopted by United Nations bodies. Under this framework, States are obligated to address all forms of violence against women, including measures for the prevention of violence, prosecution and punishment of perpetrators and the support and protection of victims.

Trafficking in women is a form of violence against women that is also addressed in global legal and policy instruments. The General Assembly of the United Nations regularly assesses national efforts to combat and eliminate trafficking in women and girls, including steps to criminalize all forms of trafficking in persons, strengthen preventive action, protect and support victims of trafficking, and enhance information-sharing and data collection. It also provides guidance to implement actions at the bilateral, subregional, regional and international levels in cooperation with all relevant actors, including States, intergovernmental organizations and civil society.

Judicial bodies, including the ad hoc tribunals created to address crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone, have contributed to greater awareness, given visibility to atrocities committed against women, and enhanced the role of the international criminal justice system in providing accountability for violence against women in armed conflict.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations recently launched a *multi-year campaign (2008-2015) "UNiTE to end violence against women"* which aims to enhance advocacy at global levels, strengthen partnerships for action at regional and national levels, and increase the leadership role of the United Nations. The Secretary-General has called on all stakeholders and actors to work with him on eradicating this significant human rights abuse by 2015. I would encourage all educators – including teachers, administrators and others represented here - to find innovative ways to be part of this important global initiative.

The Charter of the UN sets forth the goals of security, development and human rights. The present global context of increasing economic interdependence, globalization, rapid technological advances and dramatic geopolitical change highlights that security, development and peace are intricately linked and mutually reinforce each other. The

multifaceted challenge of development cuts across a vast array of interlinked issues — ranging from gender equality through health and education to the environment.]

The historic United Nations conferences and summits held in the 1990s which provided a comprehensive global normative and legal framework and strengthened these linkages – also, for the first time, mapped out a broad vision of shared development priorities. These priorities were crystallized into the eight *Millennium Development Goals*, including Goal three on the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women. It is clearly recognized that gender equality is not only a goal in itself, but is also a critical means for achieving all the other MDGs, including goal 1, to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; goal 2, to achieve universal primary education; goal 4, to reduce child mortality; goal 5, to improve maternal health; goal 6, to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; and goal 7, to ensure environmental sustainability. Attention to women's enjoyment of their human rights contributes to the achievement of all these goals.

The United Nations faces a number of *emerging issues and challenges*, such as climate change, the food crisis and the global financial crisis, all of which have to be addressed with a gender-responsive human rights approach. *Climate change*, for example, may affect the enjoyment of economic and social rights of countless individuals, such as their rights to food, health, shelter and even the right to life itself. Extreme weather conditions can be among the leading causes or contributing factors that trigger hunger, malnutrition, lack of access to water and adequate housing, exposure to disease, loss of livelihoods and permanent displacement. Other human rights, including access to information or justice and participation in decision-making processes may become increasingly relevant in a context of climate change,. Safeguarding of human rights should be a key consideration in efforts to address the impact of climate change, and human rights dimensions should be integrated into strategic planning on mitigation and adaptation to climate change.

Explicit attention needs to be paid to gender perspectives, that is, to the impact on women and men respectively, of all action taken to address these issues. Women's historical disadvantages, including their limited access to decision-making and resources, make them particularly vulnerable to the consequences of climate change. Women in rural areas in developing countries, for example, are primarily responsible for securing water, staple food and energy for cooking and heating, and the effects of climate change, including drought, uncertain rainfall and deforestation make it harder to secure these resources. Protecting and promoting their human rights – civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights – should therefore be integral to all considerations for tackling climate change.

Poverty erodes or nullifies economic and social rights such as the right to health, adequate housing, food and safe water, and the right to education. Poverty is also an impediment to the realization of other rights, such as the right to a fair trial and security of the person. The poor frequently experience social exclusion, isolation, alienation, discrimination and inequality. Poverty is also characterized by lack of participation in

decision-making in different areas of public life. The number of women in poverty remains disproportionately higher than that of men. Persistent structural discrimination, the gender-specific division of responsibilities in the household and in the formal and informal labour market, women's limited economic opportunities and access to economic resources, are among factors that have contributed to the predominance of women among the poor.

Attention to the gender perspectives is critical to ensure that anti-poverty strategies actively contribute to the elimination of discrimination against women and the promotion and protection of women's human rights. Protection of rights enhances people's capacity to contribute to development. Direct interventions to promote gender equality and eliminate discrimination, such as equal access for girls to education, women's right to land and property, to sexual and reproductive health, equal access to and opportunities in labour markets, and full and equal access to and participation in public life and decision-making, and the right to be free from all forms of violence, not only enhance the protection and promotion of human rights, but also strengthen development. Investing in women and girls has a multiplier effect on productivity, efficiency and sustained economic growth. Increasing women's economic empowerment is central to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and to poverty eradication.

[A human rights based approach that takes into account gender perspectives allows us to focus on the rights and empowerment of individual women and men and the obligations of States and the international community, and their accountability for working towards the realization of those rights.]

The work of the United Nations, in collaboration among Governments, women's organizations, academia and other actors, constitutes a comprehensive agenda for action on the promotion and protection of the rights of women and girls. Much has been achieved and the gains made clearly show that the goals of equality between women and men and the empowerment of women are achievable. However, further progress requires concerted efforts to close the gap between the international standards, norms and policies and their implementation at the national level.

Education has a critical role in achieving this. The inclusion of comprehensive human rights education in curricula at all levels, and the creation of an educational environment in which girls and boys are treated equally and encouraged to achieve their full potential, and where educational resources promote women's rights and non-stereotyped images of women and men, is essential for the elimination of discrimination and violence against women and girls and inequalities between women and men. I encourage and commend all of you in your efforts to ensure such an educational system. I also reiterate my encouragement for you to become actively involved in promoting the Secretary-General's campaign on the eradication of violence against women and girls. Schools can play a critical role in this area.

Thank you.