

The road map to prosperity for all is to invest in people and gender equality

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The following statement was submitted by the Third World Institute (ITeM), a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council, to the Fifty-fourth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, 1-12 March 2010.

Third World Institute (ITeM)

The Secretary-General of the United Nations has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

Thirty years after adopting the CEDAW and 15 years after the Beijing World Conference on Women, women all around the world still struggle for gender equality and respect of their human rights and freedoms. Despite certain progress, discrimination against women still prevails in all spheres of public life. The UN Member States still have not fully implemented their commitments for gender equality as an essential condition for sustainable economic and social development.

ITeM is the host organization of the international secretariat of Social Watch, a network of civil society coalitions in over 70 countries monitoring anti-poverty and gender equity policies since 1995. The Social Watch reports are based on the findings

of citizen organizations around the world monitoring their own governments and the analysis and processing of international statistics. Social Watch computes yearly a Gender Equity Index to provide an internationally comparable benchmark of progress towards equity in education, economic empowerment and political voice for women.

The evolution of the Gender Equity Index shows that in most countries, notable achievements have been accomplished as regards women's political participation and establishing gender quotas, inclusion in the labour market, developing institutional mechanisms for gender equality and legislation to address gender equality and violence against women, in particular domestic violence and trafficking. However, there is evident gap between legislation and implementation. The Social Watch national coalitions report on setbacks in the struggle against poverty and for gender equality. The current financial and economic crisis has exacerbated gender inequalities throughout the world. This regression is also stressed in the UN Millennium Development

Goals Report 2009. It concludes that the crises may also hold back progress towards gender equality, by creating new hurdles to women's employment. Their weaker control over property and resources, over-representation in piece-rate or vulnerable employment, lower earnings and lower levels of social protection make them, and their children, more vulnerable to the financial and economic crisis.

The reactions to the economic crisis have involved cutbacks in financing social services, as health care, child care, social protection and education in many countries. These cuts have contributed to increasing risk of feminization of poverty. The estimates are that women will enter the post-crisis period with a heavier burden of unpaid work in a family and more difficult access to decent jobs and social services, if their rights and needs are not effectively and fully protected, as demanded by the international human rights documents.

What is also worrying is the absence of women's participation in solving the crisis and in economic decision making. Gender equality machineries, women's groups and women-experts are, by a rule, excluded from the process of shaping economic decisions and context at both national and international level.

The Social Watch national reports indicate that both the national and the international responses to the global crisis present gender-blind, business-as-usual approaches including a further deregulation and liberalisation of markets and trade as solutions to dilute the crisis. The lack of reference to the states' accountability for their commitments to implement international human rights standards suggests that states consider that they may lessen them in times of crisis.

The CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action, as well as the other human rights standards, should provide a binding framework for accountability of states and non-state actors, as well as international financial institutions. The accountability mechanisms should include gender based statistics, gender responsive indicators, and gender responsive budgeting for use along with a human rights-based approach to strengthen women's empowerment and contribute to achieving gender equality and social justice. The road map to prosperity for all is to invest in people and gender equality. ■

WOMEN AND THE UN REFORM

In 2006 the United Nations announced the appointment of a new High-Level Panel on UN System-wide Coherence in areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance and the Environment. This panel was tasked with recommending changes to the UN in a wide range of structural, operational and policy issues. Gender and women's rights were not included as cross-cutting issues.

The work of the UN on women's rights has been and is important, but is based on fragmented structures within different bodies, with minimal budgets and limited country presence. Furthermore, leadership of women's agencies are irrelevant within the UN structure and therefore have no possibility to influence significant instances.

Given this, in that same year, civil society organizations carried out a Campaign for the Reform of Gender Equality Architecture (GEAR), a global initiative calling for a stronger, more powerful UN agency to defend women's rights. Thus GEAR was born, a coalition of over 300 organizations in 80 countries.

On 14 September 2009 the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution that addresses this call: the creation of a new single entity for women. According to the GA resolution, this new body will comprise the four UN agencies specialized in gender issues: UNIFEM, the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) and the Office of Special Adviser on Gender Issues (OSAGI).

The head of the new entity, with a status comparable to the UN Fund for Children (UNICEF), will have the rank of undersecretary general, the highest administrative hierarchy within the UN after the secretary general. However if its objectives are to be achieved, this new entity needs the political commitment of all governments, as well as immediate and substantial funds to ensure results. ■