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Deputy Secretary-General, in Women's Commission, Hails Possible New Gender Entity at United Nations as 'Historic Opportunity' to Give Women Stronger Voice Globally

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Date: 09 Mar 2010



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Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-fourth Session
15th Meeting (PM)

Women and Girls Conspicuously Absent from Peace, Reconstruction Processes, But They Can Change Face of Conflict, Rebuild Their Communities, Commission Told

Addressing the Commission on the Status of Women's fifty-fourth session this afternoon, Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro said the General Assembly's proposal to create a United Nations body for gender issues was an historic opportunity to give women a stronger voice in global governance and policymaking.

"This is an end in itself, as well as a means of accelerating growth and development," Ms. Migiro said during an expert panel discussion on implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to gender equality and empowerment of women, intended as a contribution to the Economic and Social Council's annual ministerial review.

"When women and girls have the same freedoms and rights as men and boys, we will have more stable economies and stronger, more peaceful societies," she said.

Ms. Migiro said formation of the single composite body would strengthen accountability in the United Nations system for gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment -- both essential parts of the Organization's development agenda.

Equal development for all, she stressed, meant more determined efforts to reach long-standing international commitments, including the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome of the Assembly's twenty-third special session.

Already, progress had been made in areas from women's and girls' education to women's participation in the labour market and in decision-making positions, she said. But challenges remained. Women and girls still faced discrimination. They accounted for two thirds of the world's illiterate population and were socially, economically and politically disadvantaged. Sustainable development could not be achieved without significantly eliminating violence against women and realizing women's rights.

She said that the good practices of many countries should be replicated and scaled up. She pointed to useful initiatives such as expanding social safety nets to lift women out of poverty and reduce their vulnerability to it, and conditional cash transfer programmes that gave incentives to send girls to school.

"We must use the lessons from these programmes to design and implement the next generation of policies that combine even greater incentives for education with smarter strategies to eliminate gender stereotypes," she urged. "We must also address the injustice that women still lack equal access to decision-making in society."

Women held more than 30 per cent of all seats in national parliaments in just 25 countries, she noted, adding that, while quotas for women had been useful, countries must be innovative in

applying strategies and targets for women's participation in all areas of decision-making in the public and private sectors. Moreover, women must have a much greater role in resolving armed conflicts, in peacebuilding, and in the post-conflict development of Governments, institutions and civil society.

Economic and Social Council President Hamidon Ali (Malaysia) said the Commission's work would be essential to the outcomes of the Council's 2010 ministerial review, including the ministerial declaration it aimed to adopt on the most pressing issues concerning promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment. "We should be committed to focus on concrete and practical steps that will make a measurable impact on women's lives," he said.

The effects of global financial crisis were exacerbated by structural vulnerabilities, like gender inequality, and efforts to eliminate them would lead to robust socio-economic development, he said. This year's review topic on implementing the internationally agreed goals on gender equality and women's empowerment was an opportunity to reinforce the cross-cutting nature of women's and girl's issues and the development agenda. Regional meetings, such as the one in Senegal in January on women and health, was aimed at preparing for the review. The Economic and Social Council also sought to give other stakeholders a chance to contribute, including through the recent special event on engaging philanthropy to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

Speaking next, Gita Sen, professor at the Centre of Public Policy at the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore, and Adjunct Professor of Global Health and Population at Harvard University, discussed the "leaky glass", saying that somewhere between intention and action, there was a slippage. Between 2004 and 2009, Social Watch's Gender Equity Index -- a measure of the gaps in education, economic activity and empowerment -- found that the education gap had significantly worsened in 24 countries from the previous period. The empowerment gap had significantly narrowed in almost 129 countries, but 70 countries fared significantly worse in economics.

For those who believed that men had borne the main impacts of the financial crisis, "that doesn't really seem to be holding out" in terms of aggregate indicators, she said. Gains in education and empowerment were not enough to close the economic gap. Women were stuck in positions that made them more vulnerable in a weak economy. She pointed to the four "traps" introduced by economist Paul Collier, saying that globalization might be hurting some countries. For example, barriers in trade negatively impacted women. Revenue booms from oil and minerals did not help -- they created volatility of staple commodities like food. Women ate last, and they ate the least. Post-conflict countries often reverted to war. Moreover, it was important to determine whether aid was being used effectively.

She said conditional cash transfers were becoming the intervention of choice in removing "gender poverty". The most positive experiences in changing household incentives to address gender were in countries like Brazil, where transfers were part of larger efforts to tackle poverty. In nations seen as "standard bearers" -- like Nordic countries -- efforts were imbedded in larger market regulation and social policies that promoted gender equality. To make progress

in the next five years, four areas needed attention. Without money, "we will go nowhere". Good wishes did not fill empty stomachs. There was also a need for competent leadership, particularly on gender equality, and internal incentives to move the agenda forward, thus creating greater accountability.

Leymah Roberta Gbowee, Executive Director of the Women, Peace and Security Network in Africa, said women and girls made up the majority of victims in the civil conflicts that emerged in the post-cold-war era. Women were the biggest actors for peace; the humiliation and pain experienced during conflict had not deterred women's peacebuilding initiatives and efforts. While they remained conspicuously absent from formal peace and reconstruction processes, they continued to prove that, given the chance, they could change the face of conflict and rebuild their communities. Their perspectives and experiences were critical to stability, the strengthening of judicial systems and national recovery.

Women were active in all three stages of peacebuilding, she said. In the pre-conflict stage, they were the first to know that a conflict was eminent; during the conflict period, they were the ones who kept communities together through efforts aimed at rebuilding; and their role in peacebuilding processes stood out as vital to the recovery of their communities.

Women's peace initiatives could be supported and strengthened by empowering local women and women's groups through training and information dissemination in areas where conflicts were brewing, she said. Their initiatives could also be strengthened through increased funding and by increasing women's representation in local, national and international conflict-resolution bodies, and in national, regional and international meetings on peace and security. Such strategies were necessary to achieve the gender equality agenda and structures within post-conflict society.

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