

Statement
by
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at the
Commemoration of 30 Years of United Nations Efforts to
Promote Gender Equality
New York, 4 March 2005

Madam Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Representatives of the NGO Community,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to be part of this celebration of women and our achievements, particularly during the last thirty years.

This journey for women's empowerment, gender equality and women's human rights started in Mexico City in 1975. At that time, we set out to sensitize the world to the unwarranted and unacceptable marginalization of women which deprived them of their rights, and excluded them from participation in development and peace processes. Thus, the theme "Equality, Development and Peace".

From Mexico we proceeded to Copenhagen in Denmark in 1980, focusing on employment, health and education. Among the demands of the Programme of Action were stronger national measures to ensure women's ownership and control of property, their rights of inheritance and child custody, and the problem of loss of nationality. The Conference also recommended that future data be disaggregated by sex and age.

The Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women widened the scope of issues by addressing constitutional and legal steps; equality in political participation and decision-making. It also offered guidelines for national measures for women's participation to promote peace and prevention of violence against women.

When we arrived in Beijing we focused, not only on achieving equality and eliminating discrimination, but also on integration of women as full and equal partners in all policies and decision-making processes. The critical areas of concern were not identified through diplomatic negotiation alone, but were shaped by the strong and organized power of the women's movement. This was also the first time that Governments committed themselves to effective mainstreaming of gender dimensions into all policies, planning and programming. The Platform

makes it clear that the strategy of gender mainstreaming is applicable in regards to all 12 critical areas of concern.

Prior to Beijing, the series of international conferences on environment, human rights, population and social development, in the 1990s had increasingly addressed gender issues and clearly influenced the outcome of the Beijing conference. And the post-Beijing conferences on human settlements, racism, financing for development and sustainable development built on the new perspectives gained in Beijing.

While the Conferences stigmatized the exclusion of women, they also contributed to a deepened understanding of the pervasiveness of discrimination in areas as diverse as women's legal status, their access to economic resources, education and health, and their role in decision-making.

We learnt one of the most powerful lessons on the way. We started out from a development focus on women's needs and on the advancement of women as an incremental move toward equality, and learnt that "adding" women to a programme does not necessarily change women's living conditions, let alone the systems, structures and institutions which are based on injustice and oppression. So, we called for empowerment and a rights-based approach, which means that women are no longer recipients of hand-outs and passive beneficiaries of development, but are full agents of change who question and transform existing power structures, and shape development at all levels.

As time has gone by, we have gained a new understanding of gender as a core concept and a lense through which to view the world and the differential needs and priorities of women and men. The concept of "gender equality" recognizes that ending discrimination against women and girls requires the involvement and partnership of men and boys in order to achieve equal and just relations between men and women in families, communities and nations.

This journey has been sustained by a strong global women's movement – of which your presence today is a powerful testimony. Despite divisions across national, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, economic or political barriers, women activists built organizations and strong networks, whose influence in shaping priorities and agendas cannot be appreciated enough. These groups have been crucial forces for transformation in the way we think about women and gender issues. Women from the South and the North have mobilized governments, NGOs, the United Nations, the media, academia and their faith communities and have built a vast body of knowledge and expertise in all fields.

The Conferences have generated discussion and consensus on new goals and new methodologies for the achievement of gender equality and the elimination of discrimination against women. They stimulated the development of international standards and norms, set targets and called for the creation of institutional mechanisms for putting national policies into place.

During the last thirty years, the cumulative effect of international conferences on women, the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the development of new policies and guidelines, new methodologies and tools, the establishment of networks of gender experts, to name just a few, illustrate our success.

We need strong leadership, enhanced political will and commitment of resources. We must be wary of a perception of “gender” as being a new word for women and the continuing marginalization of gender issues. We need male gender specialists and more strategic alliances with young women and men. And, we need to be aware of the danger of holding on too tight to our achievements rather than expanding our visions of the transformative nature of gender equality.

In the last thirty years, men have gone to the moon and back, yet women are still at the same place they were, that is trying to sensitize the world to the unwarranted and unacceptable marginalization of women which deprives them of their human rights.

It is time we acted, or else it is more than likely poverty, HIV/AIDS, criminal networks which are trafficking in women and girls, to name but a few, may get to the women before we do, in which case all our messages would be returned to us saying “Return to sender, person unknown”.

Dear Friends,

We have gone a long way marked by success and challenges. From New York, onwards to action and implementation. No time for further rhetoric.

We owe it to the next generation – to all young women and men – to ensure that all our commitments to promote gender equality become an everyday reality.

Thank you.
