

Commission on the Status of Women

Forty-ninth session

28 February to 11 March 2005

Panel VII: “The role of regional and intergovernmental organizations in promoting gender equality”

Summary submitted by the Moderator (Tebatso Future Baleseng)

1. At its 18th meeting, on 10 March 2005, the Commission on the Status of Women held a panel discussion on the role of regional and intergovernmental organizations in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women in the context of the implementation of the Beijing Platform of Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. The panelists were: Winnie Byanyima, Director, Women, Gender and Development, African Union Commission; Rawwida Baksh, Head of the Gender Section, Commonwealth Secretariat; Luisella Pavan Woolfe, Director of International Affairs, Directorate General for Social Affairs and Equality, European Commission, Wadouda Badran, Director General of the Arab Women Organization, League of Arab States; Carmen Lomellin, Executive Secretary for the Inter-American Commission of Women, Organization of American States; Ms. Beatrix Attinger Colijn, Senior Advisor on Gender Issues, Organization of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). An issues paper prepared by the Division for the Advancement of Women provided the framework for the discussion.

2. Participants highlighted the important role of regional and intergovernmental organizations in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women within the context of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. Regional and intergovernmental organizations reinforced and often created synergy among participating states in promoting gender equality. They were instrumental in focusing attention on region-specific issues and raising their visibility at the global level. They also played a critical role in establishing common ground among their member states for gender equality policies and programmes, and in introducing and monitoring common norms and standards in the area of gender equality and human rights of women. They worked in close coordination and collaboration with non-governmental organizations and other civil society representatives, including from trade unions and the private sector.

3. Regional and intergovernmental organizations worked in close collaboration with global international organizations, in particular the United Nations. The work on women, peace and security, for example, was further enhanced at regional level following adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000).

4. Regional and inter-governmental organizations facilitated and supported legislative review and amendment processes in their member states towards compliance

with international and regional standards, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (the Convention of Belem do Para). For example, the Arab Women Organization of the League of Arab States had prepared guidelines for amending legislation to address discriminatory provisions and review existing laws. Regional and intergovernmental organizations also provided policy and financial support and technical expertise for projects and programmes. For example, the European Social Fund financially supported the implementation of the European Employment Strategy and the social inclusion process. As part of their advocacy roles, organizations implemented awareness-raising campaigns and undertook capacity-building activities for government officials and women's groups on gender equality issues. They played a catalytic role in broadening the use of the gender mainstreaming strategy, including promotion of gender-responsive budgeting processes; in fostering integrated and multi-sectoral approaches to combating violence against women, trafficking in women and children; HIV/AIDS; poverty eradication, and the achievement of the MDGs. Regional and inter-governmental organizations regularly implemented research programmes and surveys on the situation of women in their regions, were involved in the collection of data disaggregated by sex and maintained data bases on the situation of women in various areas . For example, Member States of the European Union had adopted a set of indicators on domestic violence against women, based on the work of the European Commission. Organizations also played important roles in facilitating activities of national machineries for the advancement of women and the promotion of gender equality.

5. Participants noted the impact of the prevailing organizational culture, norms and practices within the organizations themselves for the success of their activities. Institutional and policy changes within the organizations had enhanced their capacities for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women among their Member States. Mainstreaming of gender perspectives in policies, programmes and projects had been accelerated by expansion of mandates, and the establishment of committees/commissions, gender focal points, adoption of action plans, increased resources, gender training of staff and the promotion of a gender-sensitive management culture and working environment. For example, the African Union Commission specifically stipulated that gender issues would be addressed in a cross-cutting manner in all the portfolios of the Commission. It had also adopted the principle of gender parity in decision-making positions. In the Commonwealth Secretariat, a Gender Steering Committee had been set up and two gender focal points had been appointed in each division to coordinate gender mainstreaming in all policies and programmes. OSCE had adopted a Code of Conduct for staff members on mission and which covered the problem of trafficking.

6. Despite certain achievements, regional and intergovernmental organizations continued to face many challenges in the promotion of gender equality, within the organizations themselves as well as in participating Member States.

7. Participants emphasized that high visibility, including commitments at the highest political and leadership levels within the organizations and the participating member states, was crucial for effective implementation of mandates regarding gender equality.

Concern was expressed that gender issues were often viewed as “soft issues” and given low priority. Lack of political and leadership support resulted in inadequate mandates, insufficient financial and human resources, unsustainable programme and project activities by national machineries and gender equality offices of regional and intergovernmental organizations. Participants expressed concern about the burden imposed on under-resourced national machineries by multiple reporting requirements of membership in several organizations at regional and global level

8. Participants agreed that in order to strengthen the work of regional and intergovernmental organizations in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, coordination and synergy among organizations themselves had to be enhanced. Reporting could be streamlined by making better use of, in particular, the reporting process under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and those regarding the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

9. Participants called for a stronger focus on their comparative advantages in promoting gender equality in different areas and for better coordination in providing technical expertise. Regional and intergovernmental organizations should support common gender equality strategies and monitor their implementation. Participants recommended that regional organizations should tackle region-specific problems which received insufficient attention at the global level. An example was the situation of particular groups of women who faced multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion on grounds such as race, ethnicity, age and class, as well as sex. Collaboration with NGOs, private sector actors, academic institutions and the media should be expanded, and much greater use should be made of locally available expertise and knowledge, especially in programme and project implementation.

12. Participants also called for gender balance among staff and in appointments, especially in decision-making positions, the enforcement of work/life policies for progress in promoting gender equality within the organizations themselves.