

International Women's Day 2010:  
Watershed for Women's Human Rights and Empowerment

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Excellencies, colleagues and friends.

I am delighted to join you today on this panel entitled '2010: Watershed for women's human rights and empowerment.' At the outset, let me express my deep appreciation to the Geneva NGO Committee on the Status of Women, and particularly its President, Ms. Conchita Poncini, our moderator, for organizing this event. Of course, I wish everyone well for International Women's Day, especially as today we mark 100 years since this day was first celebrated.

There is no doubt that much has been achieved in the quest for gender equality and the elimination of discrimination against women in the last one hundred years, not least in the context of the United Nations. Last year we celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption by the General Assembly of the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) the central international treaty setting out legal obligations for States parties for the achievement of women's equality with men in the enjoyment of all civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. Last year's human rights day also marked the tenth anniversary of the opening of the Optional Protocol to that Convention for signature, ratification and accession. This Protocol grants women the right to petition in respect of allegations of violations of the Convention, and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women with the capacity to inquire into grave or systematic violations of its terms. Together with the reporting process established by the Convention, these tools have provided the framework for the development of a strong international jurisprudence on the rights of women and girls.

There are other instruments that add to this framework. These include the 1994 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence

against Women, Security Council resolutions 1325 on women, peace and security, adopted ten years ago this year, and Security Council resolutions 1820, 1888 and 1889 which build on that resolution and seek to ensure that women's rights are taken into account in post-conflict situations. As you will be aware, the Secretary-General has appointed Ms. Margot Wallström as his Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict in line with the Security Council's request in resolution 1888.

The progress that has been made within the United Nations is mirrored at the national level. As the Council has been meeting, the fifty-fourth session of the Commission on the Status of Women has undertaken the fifteen year review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcomes of the twenty-third session of the General Assembly on Beijing+5. The review shows that the implementation of these policy instruments has had positive results for women and girls, most significantly in education, and particularly primary education. Importantly, also women's access to paid employment has increased, as has their participation in politics and public life. National legislative frameworks for the advancement of women and girls and the achievement of their rights have also been strengthened, not least because of the almost universal ratification of the Convention on

the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Gender mainstreaming strategies are increasingly applied across all sectors at the national level, and most countries have put in place national machineries for the advancement of women.

Despite these advances, elimination of discrimination and violence against women and achieving gender equality has been uneven across countries and regions. Progress in the realization of the Millennium Development Goals has been slow. It is estimated that two thirds of the world's illiterate adults are women. Women's unemployment rate is higher than men's, with many women being found in insecure and often abusive work. This trend has deepened during the global economic and social crisis, where women have suffered job losses and have been particularly affected by cutbacks in public expenditure for essential social services. Disturbingly, almost no progress has been made in respect of Millennium Development Goal 5 relating to women's maternal health, while stereotypical attitudes regarding gender roles remain deeply rooted in every country and culture. We have also seen the disproportionate impact climate change has on women. In addition, the results of inequality and discrimination against women have been underscored during recent tragic natural disasters.

Colleagues,

In 1993 the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action made clear that the human rights of women and of the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights, and called for the integration of women's rights into the United Nations human rights machinery. The Commission on Human Rights responded in a number of ways, including by establishing in 1994 the first women-specific special procedure, the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women. The Human Rights Council has also responded, in particular by taking up the issue of maternal mortality, as well as maintaining a strong focus on violence against women.

As an annual event on its agenda, the Council holds a discussion on the integration of a gender perspective in the Council's work. The panel discussion held during the twelfth session of the Council, in September 2009, focused particularly on the universal periodic review (UPR), the guiding principles of which, established in the Council's resolution 5/1, require the full integration of a gender perspective. During this panel, representatives of treaty bodies, including CEDAW, as well as special procedures mandate holders highlighted ways in which

cooperation and complementarity among these different mechanisms could be deepened. The potential for UPR to improve women's rights on the ground was particularly highlighted, as was the fact that recommendations of treaty bodies and special procedures, most notably the CEDAW and the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, could serve as inspiration for the questions and recommendations made to States under review within the UPR process, and could be drawn on more by States during the review process, both in respect of questions and recommendations. It was also noted that recommendations for ratification of CEDAW and its Optional Protocol, the withdrawal of reservations, and implementation of treaty body recommendations had been taken up, and implemented, by States under review, thereby advancing the enjoyment of women's rights.

These developments are pleasing, but much more must be done by the Council to close the gap between rhetoric and action, commitments and implementation where women's rights are concerned. The Council has a broad array of tools at its disposal, not least the UPR. Special sessions also provide a framework in which to take up violations of women's rights, especially in their chronic forms. The Council should also reflect on whether further tools may be required. I have been struck by the persistence of de jure discriminatory laws, as well as by the unequal impact

apparently neutral laws may have on women. I would urge the Council to reflect on whether a special mechanism to address these issues should be established. I would also urge the Council to consider stronger collaboration with the Commission on the Status of Women, the intergovernmental body for the advancement of women, and reflect on ways in which it will interact with the emerging United Nations gender entity.

Colleagues and friends,

Throughout my experience as a legal advocate and as a judge, I have learned that equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex are not only goals in their own right, but are essential for the achievement of all human rights for all, the realization of sustainable human development, as well as the development of all societies. Today on International Women's Day, I encourage you to be creative in proposing ideas that can strengthen the Council's work in field, so that it can fulfil its responsibilities to more than half the people of our world.

Thank you.