

**Women's Rights and Empowerment:
Gender Equality in the New Millennium.**

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I am honoured to make this presentation at the United Nations Day Banquet here in Dallas. And I am happy that my first visit to Texas, and to this fine city, is in the context of your commemoration of United Nations Day. United Nations Day marks the founding of the United Nations as an instrument of peace, human rights and development. The Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, pointed out recently that “we need an effective United Nations – one that reflects the world we live in today, and can meet the challenges we will face tomorrow.”

In this context, I am particularly pleased to speak to you on the important topic of gender equality and women’s empowerment since this is one of the major challenges facing the United Nations today. I would like to congratulate the President of the United Nations Association Dallas Chapter, Ms. Tina Patterson, other members of the board and all members of the Chapter, for making this issue the focus tonight. The work of the Association in the United States and other parts of the world makes an important contribution to achieving the goals of the United Nations, and the specific commitments to gender equality, development and peace.

A week ago, a high-level panel was held in the Third Committee of the General Assembly at the United Nations to commemorate 25 years of work to ensure ratification and implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which was adopted by the General Assembly on 18 December 1979. Participants included four past Chairpersons of the Committee as well as the Governor-General of New Zealand, Dame Sylvia Cartwright, who is a former member of the Committee. 179 States are now party to this international human rights treaty, and are obligated to translate it into practice. Adherence to the Convention, which is of paramount significance to the practical realization of the principle of equality of women and men, and its implementation in practice, fosters a climate – both internationally and nationally - where violations of the rights of women will not be tolerated.

The CEDAW Convention has been instrumental in shaping the legal and policy framework and furthering the international agenda on the human rights of women. It has been an inspiration for women in all parts of the world and has been responsible for significant change at the country level, as well as in the international sphere. Women’s groups and networks have effectively used the Convention to combat discrimination,

including in the areas of violence against women, poverty, lack of legal status, inability to inherit or own property, and lack of access to credit. The Convention has had a positive impact on legal and other developments in support of gender equality in countries throughout the world. Developments include the strengthening of provisions in Constitutions of many countries guaranteeing equality between women and men and providing a constitutional basis for the protection of women's human rights; bringing existing legislation into conformity with the principles and obligations set out in the Convention; and use of the Convention by Judges in their decision-making.

In early 2005 we will commemorate the ten-year anniversary of the Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing in 1995, and the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It will also be the thirtieth anniversary of the First World Conference on Women held in Mexico in 1975. The First World Conference established the overall vision: Gender Equality – Development – Peace, which continues to guide us today. In the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 189 countries unanimously adopted the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, which identified 12 critical areas for action. The emphasis of the Platform for Action is on the integration of women as full and equal partners in decision-making processes, and increased attention to their rights in all areas of development. With the adoption of the Platform for Action, Governments undertook to consider development issues from both women's and men's perspectives, before decisions were made and resources allocated, while continuing to carry out activities targeted to address specific gaps and inequalities between women and men.

The Platform for Action is described as an agenda for women's empowerment. Women's empowerment can be understood as a process whereby women, individually and collectively, develop awareness of the existing discrimination and inequality between women and men, and how it affects their lives; understand how power structures, processes and relationships produce and reinforce this discrimination and inequality; and gain the self confidence, capacities and resources required to challenge gender inequalities. The concept of empowerment arose from an understanding that increasing women's participation in development processes, without fundamental changes to these processes themselves, would bring about little change. Linked to this was the recognition that provision of resources and services could not tackle the root causes of gender inequality. Women need to be able to assert their own agency to break out of gender discrimination. Empowerment involves awareness raising, building of self-confidence, expansion of choices, involvement in decision-making and increased access to and control over resources.

In the context of reviewing ten years of implementation, it is important to honestly and constructively identify what has been achieved in the decade since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action; what obstacles, gaps and challenges remain to be addressed; and what potentials for change exist that are currently being under-utilized.

There have been significant advances for women in many parts of

the world in relation to health, education and employment over the past decade. However, the persistent, and in some cases increasing, incidence of violence against women; the under-representation of women in decision-making in all areas and at all levels; the persistence of discriminatory laws governing marriage, land, property and inheritance; and the fact that women continue to be disproportionately affected by poverty, is unacceptable in this new millennium. In addition, new challenges for women's empowerment and gender equality have emerged over the past decade, such as combating HIV/AIDS; addressing trafficking in women and girls; and mobilizing the new information and communication technologies (ICT) in support of gender equality and women's empowerment.

Even in areas where progress has been made, there is still much room for improvement. For example, in many countries the gains made in terms of improved access of girls and women to education have not empowered women or translated into benefits in terms of increased employment opportunities. While access to health services has improved in many countries, in other countries women lack even the most basic reproductive health care. In some cases, women's increased access to employment is only to work of a part-time nature, and women's wages remain often significantly less than men's.

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Let me briefly outline the progress made and some of the remaining gaps and challenges in a number of critical areas for gender equality and empowerment of women.

Despite global recognition of the fundamental right of women and men to participate in political and public life, women are underrepresented at most levels of government and have made slow progress in attaining political power in legislative bodies. Today, the proportion of seats held by women in legislative bodies stands at 15.4 percent, the highest world average reached to date. This figure continues a trend of gradual but sustained growth but the pace of change is far too slow. Despite the progress made, only 14 countries today have at least 30 percent representation of women in parliament, which had been established as a ta

percent of seats in the national parliament, currently the highest percentage of women in parliament in the world.

20 t6s Women's opportunities to exercise power are in many contexts greater at the local than at the national level. In India and France, policies to increase women's political participation in local legislative elections led to significant increases in women's presence in local office. Since 1993, one-third of seats in local councils in India are reserved for women. Studies of women's participation in village councils report on the empowering effects on the women themselves as well as the positive impact of women's presence on local politics. Women's presence has made the councils more responsive to community demands for infrastructure, housing, schools, and health; helped improve the implementation of various government programmes; and increased the likelihood that other women also feel empowered and take advantage of state services and demand rights.

Latin America and the Caribbean has made the most noticeable progress of any region in the area of women's political participation. In only one decade, the number of countries with very poor representation of women went down from 20 to seven. The Latin American experience highlights the importance of quotas, although it is

In his opening statement to the General Assembly this year, the Secretary-General focused on the rule of law as the all-important framework at national and international level. He reminded us that rule of law means first and foremost that no one is above the law and no one should be denied its protection. He also emphasized that rule of law as a concept is not enough: “laws must be put into practice and permeate the fabric of our lives”. Those who champion equality for women rely to a large extent on the power of the law, and the protection which it can offer, to overcome discrimination and disadvantage. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women has been used as the legal basis and as a powerful instrument for furthering the rights of women.

I would like to touch on one very specific aspect of women’s rights – the right to own property and assets. Women’s importance in food production underscores the need to provide them with security of tenure for the land they cultivate. Secure land tenure can increase women’s probability of accessing credit, finding supplementary wage employment and increasing productivity. This can be especially crucial in situations where women are the principal farmers. In the context of HIV/AIDS, ownership and control over economic assets can save women from total and complete destitution. When they are unable to inherit land after the death of a father or husband due to AIDS, women are rendered powerless and unprotected just when they most need protection and support.

Women in many countries around the globe, however, lack any claim to land and other property as a result of unequal inheritance practices; the registering of land and property in the name of the head of household (usually defined as a male); unequal access to land markets, based on custom and unequal economic assets; and gender-biased land reforms. Women’s infrequent control of land and other property exacerbates their generally low status, compared to men, and is directly linked to development-related problems faced by women across the globe, including poverty, HIV/AIDS, and violence.

The case of Rwanda provides a picture of promising change in empowering women through land rights. Serious gender inequalities in land rights were rectified during post-conflict reconstruction. Pathbreaking legislation was passed, which enshrines the principle that women may own property and inherit on an equal basis with their brothers. It also requires couples registering for marriage to make a joint

death and incapacity among reproductive-age women as is cancer, and it is a more common cause of ill-health among women than traffic accidents and malaria combined. The disempowering effects of violence against women are enormous.

Violence against women is accepted as the norm in far too many parts of the world – a private business, a normal occurrence in the relationship between a man and a

have become weapons of warfare and are one of the defining characteristics of contemporary armed conflict. Women and children also constitute the majority of the world's refugees and internally displaced persons.

Women and girls are vulnerable to all forms of violence, but particularly sexual violence and exploitation, including rape, mass rape, forced pregnancy, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, and trafficking. Sexual violence has been a strategy of armed conflict in virtually all recent armed conflicts. In post-conflict contexts, women are also extremely vulnerable to rape in refugee camps. One study found that 26 percent of Burundi women in a Tanzanian camp had experienced sexual violence since becoming a refugee. Easy access to weapons increases interpersonal violence, including domestic

The required policy framework for gender equality and empowerment of women is already in place; it is not more recommendations that we need. The Platform for Action contains many critical recommendations which have yet to be implemented at national level. In most cases the needed legislative changes, policies, programmes and activities which are needed to ensure full implementation of the goals the United Nations has set for gender equality and the empowerment of women are already well known. What is lacking is implementation.

Positive actions have been taken in many countries with very good results. Efforts have, however, too often not been systematic and sustained. They have been ad hoc and marginal, and not developed as an integral part of efforts in different sector areas. The good practice examples that do exist are not shared systematically and the spin-off effects are poor. A large gap therefore continues to exist between policy commitments made at the Fourth World Conference and actual implementation at national level. The challenge ahead is to get the job of implementation done.

What can be done to move forward? A taskforce on Millennium Development Goal Three, in the context of the Millennium Project, has highlighted that gender inequality is a problem that has a solution. More than three decades of research, activism and innovation, have shown that achieving the goal of greater gender equality and empowerment of women is possible. It does, however, require explicit commitment, concerted action, adequate resources and clear accountability.

Two issues immediately come to mind as critical for improving implementation. Firstly, greater efforts are needed to engage and involve men and boys. Gender equality is not only important for women and girls. It should be of concern to men and boys, families, communities and nations. Promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment cannot be done in a vacuum; men and boys must be brought along in the process of change.

Secondly, there needs to be much greater attention to adolescent girls and boys. The empowerment of adolescent girls must be a priority in the new millennium. The vulnerability of the situation of adolescent girls, which I hope my address has illustrated, and the impact of the attitudes and behaviour of adolescent boys in this regard makes this age-group critical. In addition, the sheer numbers of adolescents in many parts of the world and the potential for changing values, attitudes and behaviour during this transition phase into adulthood, illustrates the importance of identifying their concerns and needs and addressing them specifically.

In addition, ensuring that the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is used more effectively at national, regional and international levels would also move implementation forward. The Convention remains a critical instrument in promoting gender equality and empowerment of women. Often described as the international bill of rights for women, it is the human rights treaty that addresses most comprehensively women's equality with men and non-discrimination in the civil, political, economic, social and cultural fields. Only 12 Member States of the UN have not

ratified the Convention, including the United States. Good examples of the constructive use of the Convention to reduce inequality and empower women should be disseminated broadly and the Convention should be systematically used in policy dialogue with all States parties.

The taskforce working on Millennium Development Goal 3 in the Millennium Project recognizes that achieving true gender equality and women's empowerment requires a different vision for the world, not just piecemeal rectification of different aspects of existing inequality between women and men. *"The Task Force's vision is of a world in which men and women work together as equal partners to secure better lives for themselves and their families. In this world, women and men share equally in the enjoyment of basic capabilities, economic assets, voice, and freedom from fear and violence. They share the care of children, the elderly, and the sick; the responsibility for paid employment; and the joys of leisure. In such a world, the resources now used for war and destruction are instead invested in human development and well-being; institutions and decision-making processes are open and democratic; and all human beings treat each other with respect and dignity."*

This is the vision we must take forward into this new millennium and work tirelessly to ensure its achievement through increased commitment, action and accountability. The efforts of each one of us – men as well as women – are critical if this vision is to be realized. The United Nations Association can play an important role in raising awareness in this city, and in the United States as a whole, to ensure full commitment and all required resources to achieve equality, development and peace, and the fulfillment of the promise made to the women and girls of the world at the First World Conference in Mexico in 1975 and reiterated in Beijing in 1995.

I commend the United Nations Association Dallas Chapter for your efforts in this regard.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share these thoughts with you this evening. I want to particularly thank Kambiz Rafraf and Beth and Rodney Pirtle for their efforts to make my participation tonight possible.