

**“A new world:
A vision for gender equality and empowerment of women”**

**address by
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I am honoured to make this presentation to the Contemporary Woman Program at the Brescia University and happy that my first visit to Kentucky is in this context. I want to begin by congratulating Brescia University on its Contemporary Women's Program which I understand was one of the first such programmes to be established at a university in this country. I want to thank the current Director, Sr. Rose Marita O'Bryan for inviting me to talk to you today.

My talk today focuses on a new world or a new vision for the world where gender equality and empowerment of women would be the critical starting point. The vision of gender equality and empowerment of women was first established at global level in the United Nations Charter in 1945 which declared faith “in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small...” This reference to gender equality already at the founding of the United Nations is said to have been largely the result of intensive lobbying by women delegates and representatives of the 42 non-governmental organizations accredited to the founding conference of the United Nations.

The vision...

It is difficult to say with certainty what a world truly based on gender equality would look like, since we are still so far from achieving it. The Charter in 1945 did not provide specific details of the changes required to ensure the fundamental rights of both women and men, but this has been clearly elaborated over the past six decades through the world conferences on women organized by the United Nations.

I would like to offer one expression of that vision put forward by the Taskforce on the Millennium Development Goal on Gender Equality and empowerment of Women. This new world would be *“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 their 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.”

Experience over the past decades has certainly produced evidence that a more gender-equal world would be a better world. The Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, once said that there was no development tool more effective than the empowerment of women. He has also stated that if we want to save Africa from famine and HIV/AIDs, we would do well to focus on saving the women of Africa.

The positive links between gender equality and empowerment of women and effective and sustainable development are very clear, particularly in areas where the roles and contributions of women as well as men are visible. Women represent half the resources and half the potentials of families, communities and nations. Research has shown that, in many contexts, more equitable access to education by women and girls can give very positive returns in improved family health, greater productivity, and reduced family size. Greater health for women impacts positively on the health of other family members, especially children.

Experience in agriculture in developing countries has indicated that the neglect of women's productive roles, particularly in relation to food crop production, can be directly related to the persistence of poverty and hunger. There is also evidence from water supply and sanitation programmes in developing countries that the sustainability and impact of these programmes can be positively affected by attention to gender perspectives and increasing the involvement of women.

Investing in women contributes to economic development as well as social gains, and can lead to significant inter-generational payoffs in relation to poverty eradication. The World Bank has concluded that gender equality and empowerment of women makes good economic sense. Women are important as both producers and consumers. It is well established that ensuring women's equitable access to credit is cost-effective as women are generally more reliable credit-takers than men. There is also evidence from a number of countries that the benefits for family welfare of increased incomes for women are greater than the benefits of increased incomes for men. Women's incomes tend to be more consistently utilized for expenditures on health, food and schooling which benefit the whole family.

Gender inequality clearly involves significant costs for society. Women bear the development costs of inequality which not only impact negatively on women themselves, but also on families and communities.

The world is certainly a very different and better place in many ways today than in 1945. There have been significant achievements in relation to gender equality and empowerment of women. Unfortunately, however, gender equality and empowerment of women has not been given the systematic and sustained priority attention needed to

There have been some significant advances for women in many parts of the world in relation to health, education and employment. Even in these areas, however, there are still grounds for continued concern. For example, in many countries the gains made in

There have been some exciting developments in women's *political participation* at national levels recently, including the election of the first woman President in Africa, Ellen Sirleaf-Johnsson in Liberia, the election of a woman, Angela Merkel, as the head of state in Germany and the election of Michelle Bachelet as the new President in Chile. Important achievements in political decision making have also been made, more quietly, in other countries. For example, following recent elections in Tanzania, seven women ministers were appointed, including in the critical posts of Foreign Affairs, Finance and Justice. In Austria, six out of 12 office holders in the Federal Government are women, including the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

However, despite these important gains, and the global political recognition of the fundamental right of women and men to participate in political and public life, the gap between *de jure* and *de facto* equality in the area of power and decision-making remains wide. The proportion of seats held by women in legislative bodies is the highest world average reached to date and yet it is dismally low - 16 percent. While this figure indicates a trend of gradual growth, the pace of change is clearly far too slow. Only 14 countries have at least 30 percent representation of women in parliament, which had been established as a target for 1995, and is still not achieved ten years later.

Many of the gains that have been made, in particular in Africa and Latin America, can be attributed to affirmative action, such as quotas, established in constitutions, by legislation or through temporary special measures.

One encouraging trend is the fact that a number of post-conflict countries have highlighted and addressed the importance of including women in reconstruction processes, and of ensuring their participation in new democratic institutions. As a result, Rwanda, Mozambique, South Africa, Namibia, Timor-Leste, Uganda and Eritrea - appear in the top 30 countries with regard to women's participation in legislative bodies, averagi

more responsive to community demands for infrastructure, housing, schools, and health. It has also helped improve the implementation of various government programmes, and it has increased the likelihood that other women also feel empowered and take advantage of state services and demand rights.

There is little statistical data available on women in other areas of decision-making. For example, we know very little about the representation of women in the *judiciary* at national level, even at the level of the highest courts. Internationally, a breakthrough was achieved with the appointment of 7 women of 18 judges, as well as the appointment of a woman as Vice President, of the International Criminal Court and Court, which was a direct result of affirmative action.

While in many countries women's share of low and middle-level positions within *media* organizations has risen over the last decade, the number of women in senior press, radio and television, and the newly emerging sectors of telecommunications, multi-decision-making positions remained very small – in both traditional media institutions of media and e-media. Reliable and comparable data are scarce. A study published by the International Federation of Journalists found that although around one third of journalists today are women, less than 3 per cent of senior media executives and decision-makers are women. Women are also under-represented in critical media advisory bodies, such as control boards of broadcasting agencies.

Comparable data is also needed on the *academic world* to confirm the picture which emerges from some countries. While an increasing number of women are graduating from universities, both at graduate and post-graduate levels and often with better results than men, women are not gaining secure employment in academia or receiving funding for research to the same extent as men. In addition, women are seriously under-represented in higher decision-making positions, such as Presidents or as Chancellors, including in the Nordic countries which otherwise have a good record on women's representation in the legislature and the executive.

Little is known about women's equitable participation within *non-governmental organizations* (NGOs). There has been a significant increase in women's specific 75 NGOs).

constitute only 33 per cent of managerial and administrative posts in the developed world; 15 per cent in Africa; and 13 per cent in Asia and the Pacific.

Very little comparable data exists on the representation of women in the *private*

and international organizations, including in the area of peace and security. Without this, it will continue to be simply too easy to say there are no suitable and willing women candidates, with the necessary, skills or experience without actually making an effort to identify women candidates.

Ensuring that both women and men will be able to influence decisions and resource allocations requires, however, going beyond simply increasing the number of women in different positions, to providing real opportunities for influencing the agendas, institutions and processes of decision-making. Values, norms, rules, procedures and practices, including political bodies such as parliaments and political parties, can effectively restrict women's potential to make real choices and to give explicit attention to relevant gender perspectives.

This overview of women's participation in decision-making provides a somewhat dismal but realistic picture of what has been achieved and what still remains to be done. It is sometimes claimed that women should be more involved in decision-making because they are less corrupt than men. However, the truth is that we cannot say this with certainty, since women have never been given the chance to prove themselves through equal participation in decision-making in any field. It has also been said that the real test of achievement of gender equality is when women can be as mundane as men and still succeed. This is a somewhat cynical way of saying that, because we still live in an unequal world, to succeed in any area, women often have to do much better than men.

Moving forward in creating the new world

To move forward in creating a new world based on gender equality, we need to *build on the gains we have already made* and make full use of mechanisms that have proven useful and have potential for having an even greater impact.

An important learning that emerged from the ten-year review is that there is a huge gap between policy and practice which must be explicitly addressed. We do not need more recommendations. In most areas the actions required are already well known. The challenge is ensuring effective implementation. The Declaration adopted by Member States at the ten-year review called for accelerated implementation of the existing global policy framework, the Platform for Action.

There is a clear need for increased advocacy and demands for action, for accountability of decision-makers, and for systematic monitoring and reporting on process. Governments – in particular political leaders - obviously have the main responsibility, but non-governmental organizations and community groups can and should play a critical role – in “raising the bar”, keeping attention on the issue and “blowing the whistle” whenever necessary.

The United Nations should continue to play an important role, in particular at national level through its operational activities. The Commission on the Status of Women could have a strong impact through its increased focus on reviewing progress at national

level and foster greater sharing of ideas, experience, lessons learned and good practices, which are the basis of its newly adopted work programme.

A critical mechanism for promoting gender equality and empowerment of women is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The convention was adopted in 1979, and entered into force in 1981. Today 182 States have ratified the treaty. The Optional Protocol to the Convention, adopted in 1999, has been ratified by 78 States. The protocol offers women an international avenue of redress for alleged violations of their rights. It also allows the Committee – the 23 independent experts elected to monitor the implementation of the Convention - to conduct inquiries into situations of grave or systematic violations in States parties.

The value of the Convention as a critical accountability mechanism must be recognized and new strategies developed to ensure its full implementation. When countries ratify the Convention, they assume specific obligations. States parties are expected to include the principle of equality of women and men in their constitutions, and to realize this principle in practice through laws and other means in both public and private domains. The convention obliges States to remove both de jure, as well as de facto discrimination – which is very important in countries where the laws may be very good, but where practice leaves much to be desired.

A major strength of the Convention is the fact that States Parties are required to report on a regular basis. When States parties present their reports, their representatives meet with the Committee for a constructive dialogue on progress in implementing the Convention at national level. The Committee prepares a set of recommendations on action needed to improve the implementation of the Convention. This set of recommendations, specifically tailored for the individual States parties, is a very unique "instrument" that could be used more systematically and effectively at national level by governments, parliaments, civil society and by the United Nations and external donors.

The convention has been an inspiration for women in all parts of the world. It has had a positive impact on legal and policy development, leading to significant change at national level – in constitutions, legislation and in courts. The Convention has also been effectively utilized by NGOs as a benchmark for assessing the situation of women and as a tool for advocacy and activism.

Civil society has played a critical role in achieving the progress made on gender equality and empowerment of women, and will continue to be instrumental in accelerating progress. Ensuring greater involvement of civil society in its work is a challenge facing the United Nations. This includes, in keeping with the principles and spirit of the United Nations, bringing in the voices from all regions, including in policy making.

There is a need for change and renewal, however, even within these organizations. Many participants at the ten-year review noted that the review process had illustrated the continuing importance and strength of the women's movement. Many also

acknowledged the need for change and renewal and emerging tensions which needed to be address

can have negative or low expectations and self-images. Change will require significant efforts and take time. Clearly the important starting points must be in families and in schools, reaching both girls and boys in the important formative years. Media has also a critical role to play. Good practices have been developed in schools and communities and in media which can be replicated in other contexts.

Let me give one example of how negative attitudes and practices can hinder achievement of gender equality. Efforts to promote women's human rights in the 1970s and 1980s included legislative change and legal literacy programmes to ensure that women were aware of their rights and how to claim them. Assessment of the reasons for limited progress of the programme revealed the need to address the negative attitudes of the police, lawyers and judges which were a significant hinder to women achieving access to justice. This led to an intensive programme of training on women's human rights which had significant positive results. I

In one country, however, none of the measures seemed to lead to the expected changes. Investigation revealed that women did not even get past the "courthouse door" as lower-level officials, including doormen – who had not been reached by the training - were effectively blocking physical women's access, for example, with the justification that women should not waste the time of the courts. I am sure we could find equally telling examples of how stereotypes hinder gender equality and empowerment of women closer to home.

I would also like to raise *gender-based violence* as a serious form of discrimination that seriously inhibits women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality with men and requires a comprehensive response from Governments and other stakeholders, including actions to prevent violence, prosecute and punish perpetrators and provide remedies and relief to victims.

Gender-based violence is exacerbated in conflict and its aftermath. Over the past decade women and girls have become prime targets of armed conflict and suffered its impact disproportionately; particularly as gender-based and sexual violence have become weapons of warfare. As the majority of the world's refugees and internally displaced persons, women and children are also vulnerable to violence, even in refugee camps.

The vulnerability of women and girls to HIV/AIDS in many parts of the world, and particularly in Africa, can be directly linked to the relations between women and men as well as to persistent stereotypes about what is appropriate and acceptable behaviour for women and men in relation to reproduction and sexuality. Violence against women increases the vulnerability of women and girls to HIV/AIDS, including by removing their possibilities to negotiate safe sexual relationships. As a result, many women and girls live in intolerable environments of fear – fear of the violence itself and fear of the consequences of not being able to make demands and protect themselves.

Much of what I have said so far in this presentation, must make very clear that gender equality is not only important for women and girls- it should also be a concern for

men and boys. Promotion of gender equality cannot be done by women alone and in a

Gender perspectives are still not seen as essential for achieving the goals of all policy areas. Many Governments and organizations continue to base their work on the assumption that certain policy areas – for example, economics or infrastructure or other technical areas – are “gender-neutral”. Even where the gender implications are well

The framework of Millennium Development Goals (one of which is focused on gender equality and empowerment of women) was developed after the Millennium Summit in 2000. The Millennium Development Goals have effectively mobilized Governments, international organizations and NGOs and enhanced the focus on implementation and reporting. Although attention to gender equality in the other goals (focused on poverty, education, health, HIV/AIDS, environment and solidarity) has not been adequate to date, the Millennium Development Goals do provide important new opportunities for increasing the visibility of gender issues in national development planning and reporting, developing new alliances and increasing access to resources.

In the 2005 World Summit, world leaders declared that progress for women is progress for all and reiterated their resolve to eliminate discrimination against women. This provides a new opportunity to enhance the focus on gender equality. Women are disproportionately affected by many of the problems demanding world attention, such as poverty and conflicts. A strong focus on women's contributions, priorities and needs in implementation of the commitments made by heads of state at the World Summit will be essential to ensure effective and enduring solutions to the huge problems facing the world today.

The on-going process of reform provides a unique opportunity for the United Nations to increase the attention to gender equality and the empowerment of women across the United Nations system, ensuring a strong explicit focus in new bodies being created and increased demands for responsibility and accountability in existing bodies. It will be important to ensure that attention to the institutional mechanisms and resources for gender equality are given adequate consideration in the United Nations reform process. All parts of the system should have significant specific human and financial resources allocated for an enhanced focus on gender equality and empowerment of women as an integral part of follow-up to the 2005 World Summit.

As the Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, has emphasized time and time again - gender equality is not the responsibility of women, it is the responsibility of us all, women as well as men. We must all share this responsibility in solidarity with the struggles of women around the world.

Our individual contributions are important. At the very least, we should be clear about the vision of the world we want to see and ensure that it is achieved in our own "worlds". We all - men as well as women - need to stand up and refuse to accept the inequalities we still face or see around us. These inequalities are often subtle and insidious and it often takes considerable courage to confront them, particularly when this is often seen as petty and ridiculous.

Only if we are prepared to do this, can there be hope for gender equality and empowerment of women in the wider world.