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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 26th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. KRENKEL
later: Mr. DEKANY
(Vice-Chairman)

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CONTENTS

AGENDA ITEM 94: ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN (continued)

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The meeting was called to order at 6.05 p.m.

AGENDA ITEM 94: ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN (continued) (A/47/38; A/47/82-S/23512, A/47/88-S/23563; A/47/340, A/47/368, A/47/377, A/47/391, A/47/508, A/47/564)

1. Mrs. KHANUM (Bangladesh) said that in the developed world, despite some significant improvements in the condition of women, gender-based discrimination was not uncommon. In the developing countries, deep-rooted social prejudices, poor socio-economic infrastructure, poverty and illiteracy had kept women back. The basic issues of women's rights to education, adequate health care and nutrition, employment and recreation remained to be addressed in depth. Violence against women continued unabated, both at home and in the workplace. The threats of domestic violence, dowry deaths, sexual assaults and trafficking of women could only be resolved by rigid preventative and punitive measures. Therefore, her delegation welcomed the draft Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women.

2. It was hoped that the Commission on the Status of Women, at its thirty-seventh session, would address the problem of the feminization of poverty. The Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women had provided a blueprint for national and international policies designed to address that issue. The 1995 World Conference on Women would provide an opportunity to take specific decisions to strengthen the effectiveness of the Nairobi Strategies.

3. Any effort to attain prosperity should include the full integration of women in the mainstream of social, economic and political development activities. Legislation had been formulated to guard against gender-based discrimination in her country and to promote the active involvement of women at the policy-making level. Policies had been introduced to help educate the society to abandon existing prejudices and facilitate women's access to education. To encourage women's participation in the public sector, the age limit for entering public service had been lowered and job quotas had been fixed for women.

4. Since almost 80 per cent of women in Bangladesh lived in rural areas, women's effective participation in the rural economy was of crucial importance. National development plans focused on elevating rural women through better access to health, education, vocational training and credit facilities. Women were encouraged, for example, to develop their own cooperatives in handicrafts and cottage industries.

5. Between 1961 and 1991, the number of women seeking employment outside the home had dramatically risen: from 9 per cent to 90 per cent, most often as a result of sheer necessity. It was encouraging to note that in urban areas, the number of women professionals was gradually gaining strength.

(Mrs. Khanum, Bangladesh)

6. Problems related to the development of women were linked to deep-rooted traditional attitudes and often to a misinterpretation of religion, and while the Government had adopted effective legislation on violence against women, the strength of the law lay in its timely implementation. She commended the fact that the Commission on the Status of Women would take up legal literacy at its next session.

7. National efforts needed to be supplemented by international cooperation and assistance and it was logical that all United Nations agencies should devote a certain part of their development programmes to women. Her delegation commended the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the International Training and Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) for their very positive contribution towards the advancement of women, particularly in the developing countries.

8. Mr. Dekany (Hungary), Vice-Chairman, took the Chair.

9. Ms. COOMBS (New Zealand) said that women were disproportionately represented among the poor; they had had suffered grievously in situations of conflict and famine; and, with their children, they constituted the majority of refugees in the world.

10. At the national level renewed efforts had to be exerted to ensure full de jure equality for women and to remove the obstacles to de facto equality. Improving women's knowledge of their legal rights was regarded as priority in New Zealand's national programmes for women and the questions of family violence and sexual harassment relevant to the priority theme of peace were being addressed by awareness campaigns and the establishment of grievances procedures. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) had continued its important work in that area, adopting a helpful general recommendation which encouraged States parties to take effective measures to eliminate violence against women.

11. Attention should continue to be focused on women living in extreme poverty and on the related question of how to integrate women's concerns into national development planning. Failure to consider women's roles and their contribution to the economy increased project risks and reduced the chances of sustainable development. New Zealand was implementing a policy that was specifically targeted to vulnerable women and would increase the efficiency and effectiveness of New Zealand's development aid delivery.

12. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) had provided an historic opportunity to assess progress and to identify pathways to sustainable development. The Rio Declaration had stressed the need for the full participation of women in environmental management and development in order to achieve sustainable development. New Zealand welcomed UNCED's recognition of the role of women and supported effective efforts to ensure that women contributed fully to the successful implementation of Agenda 21.

(Ms. Coombs, New Zealand)

Throughout the UNCED process, the United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM) had worked tirelessly to help ensure that women's concerns were fully incorporated in Agenda 21. In order to ensure their participation in the follow-up process, women should occupy half the seats on the new Commission on Sustainable Development.

13. New Zealand looked forward to further consideration of the themes of equality, development and peace at the next session of the Commission on the Status of Women. The Commission needed to build on the good start it had made in planning for the fourth World Conference on Women and to allocate sufficient resources for those activities. Non-governmental organizations in New Zealand had already expressed considerable interest in the fourth World Conference on Women and her Government was pleased that provision would be made for their fullest possible involvement in the Conference and its associated meetings.

14. In recognition of the celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of women's suffrage in New Zealand, the Government had established a special trust to fund projects to inform people about the contribution of women to New Zealand and to enhance women's knowledge, skills and opportunities. The anniversary was an opportunity for New Zealanders to assess the current status of women and to consider the steps that still needed to be taken to achieve true equality. The conclusions of that assessment process would guide the activities of participants from New Zealand at the fourth World Conference in 1995.

15. Ms. AL-HAMAD (Kuwait) said that her country took an avid interest in issues relating to the advancement of women and looked forward to the opportunity to participate in the forthcoming fourth World Conference on Women.

16. Two years after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, a number of Kuwaiti women were still being held prisoner in Iraq - she therefore called upon the international community to exert pressure on Iraqi authorities to release all prisoners. Within Kuwait, however, women were successfully recovering from the traumas caused by the Iraqi invasion and were increasingly involved in all aspects of society - social, cultural and economic.

17. Education was the catalyst for the significant progress which Kuwaiti women had achieved to date. The Kuwaiti Government had devoted substantial resources to education - dramatically reducing the number of illiterate women and according to a UNESCO report, the number of women enrolled in higher education exceeded the number of men.

18. Kuwaiti women were also gaining ground in the labour market. Among women college graduates, 82 per cent were employed, and Kuwaiti women had equal opportunity to work in most of the fields to which they aspired. The Kuwaiti constitution guaranteed equality in employment between the sexes and women were represented in many prestigious positions in academia and government.

(Ms. Al-Hamad, Kuwait)

19. Kuwaiti women's organizations had held numerous regional conferences addressing issues of concern to women including education and economic development and those conferences had demonstrated the leadership abilities of Kuwaiti women. The newly elected Kuwaiti parliament was considering granting women the right to vote in the 1996 elections.

20. Kuwaiti women took an interest in international matters of concern not only to women but to the world as a whole, such as the abuses suffered by Palestinians in the occupied territories, the famine in Somalia and the critical situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Kuwait would persevere in its efforts to promote and elevate the status of women and to grant women the rights to which they were legally entitled.

21. Mr. AL-TAEY (Oman) said that women, who represented one half of society, were a vital key to the success of development and were fully capable of assuming their share of responsibility. His Government therefore accorded great importance to improving women's education and health levels, as well as their economic and social position. Its policy was to develop the country's human resources, which included women, by promoting education, training and skills. Meanwhile, women in Oman contributed effectively to the development process and took part in regional and international activities related to women's affairs. A women's association had been established, with branches throughout most of the country, which, among other things, was helping with literacy and child development programmes successfully run by the Government.

22. One outcome of the radical changes that had occurred in Oman was that the Omani woman now had many other roles to play in addition to that of wife and mother; for instance, women now held leading positions in many Government and private institutions. In addition, under Omani legislation, women were now guaranteed the same rights and privileges as men; they had equal pay and employment opportunities and job vacancies were filled on the basis of ability. Women also had special legal concessions, such as maternity grants and paid maternity leave.

23. Ms. ANTONINO (Philippines) said that the experience of the Philippines in re-establishing democracy under the leadership of Corazon Aquino had demonstrated that women could act as catalysts for change. The new Philippine Constitution recognized the role of women in the nation-building process and ensured fundamental equality of the sexes before the law. In addition, a new family code had eliminated many of the discriminatory provisions of the country's former civil code.

24. An unprecedented number of Filipino women had been candidates in elections for government positions ranging from municipal councils to the national legislature, and many of them had been elected. Female members of the legislature had joined together to co-sponsor women's legislation, and a committee on women and family relations had been created in the Philippine Senate. In response to the proclamation of International Women's Year, a

(Ms. Antonino, Philippines)

national commission on the role of Filipino women had been created. The commission had been instructed to take action to put issues of concern to women on the agendas of national, regional and international bodies.

25. Despite signs of improvement in the status of women in the Philippines, sex-role stereotyping and the low level of awareness of women's problems and rights continued to exert a negative influence, particularly on poor women. As the Secretary-General's report on the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women had pointed out, an awareness of women's rights was one of the keys to equality, as it was vital to the exercise and preservation of those rights.

26. In order to address the relationship between gender issues and development, the Philippine Government had adopted a specific development plan for women in which national development planning agencies were establishing mechanisms to ensure the responsiveness of development programmes to women's needs. Working with the United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Government had issued a manual of operations designed to increase the sensitivity of government policies to the needs of women, and had created employment projects to benefit women living in poverty.

27. As women living in rural areas played a critical role as food producers, the continuing rise in the number of rural women living in poverty was a cause for concern. The Philippines therefore welcomed the Geneva Summit on the Economic Advancement of Rural Women as a timely measure to focus the attention of the world community on the plight of women in rural areas.

28. The Philippines had fully supported the resolutions and decisions of the Commission on the Status of Women, in particular the resolution on violence against women which had called upon Governments to recognize that the elimination of violence against women was essential to achieving equality for women. The resolution had also urged Member States to adopt, strengthen and enforce legislation prohibiting such violence.

29. The Philippines had also drawn attention to the plight of young women from developing countries who had migrated to more affluent countries to find employment and were subject to violence and abuse. While it was the primary duty of the State to provide its citizens with appropriate training and education to enable them to improve their lot in life, the migration of workers to more affluent countries was a global problem because it was fuelled by the global economic crisis. Therefore, the problem of mistreatment of female migrant workers was also a global problem. Countries receiving immigrants had the moral obligation to ensure the human rights and freedoms of all persons within their boundaries. A concerted effort by both receiving countries and countries of origin to address the problem either bilaterally or multilaterally was called for. Her Government hoped that the question would be given further consideration in other international forums with a view to finding a just and lasting solution.

(Ms. Antonino, Philippines)

30. The Philippines looked forward to active participation in the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, and was prepared to cooperate fully in preparations for the Conference.
31. Mr. GAUTAM (Nepal) said that the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women established a linkage between the advancement of women and development. Unfortunately, the optimism which had followed the adoption of the Nairobi Strategies had dissipated for lack of political commitment and as a result of the deteriorating socio-economic situation in the developing countries. The recommendations and conclusions of the first review and appraisal meeting on the Nairobi Strategies could provide new impetus for their implementation in the 1990s.
32. His Government believed that the recommendations contained in Agenda 21 on the role of women in development should be incorporated in national plans and programmes following the example of Nepal. Although global action for the advancement of women was important, primary responsibility for the improvement of conditions for women lay with national governments. Despite constraints imposed by poverty and illiteracy, the Government of Nepal was firmly committed to ameliorating the plight of Nepalese women. The five-year plan launched in 1992 incorporated a national policy designed to involve women in all aspects of development. In the countryside, government programmes to encourage income-generating activities had contributed to helping rural women earn cash income.
33. The Nepalese Government was committed to eliminating gender-based discrimination and ensuring women's access to education and employment. Legislation to create legal instruments to ensure women's equal access to property rights was currently under discussion in Nepal's national parliament. If enacted, it would have a profound effect on the socio-economic status of Nepalese women.
34. Nepal was also making every effort to ensure women's access to education. Education up to the sixth grade had been declared free and compulsory, and the Government intended to make secondary education free in the next few years. To underscore the importance of female literacy educational opportunities were being offered to girls from under-privileged backgrounds in the form of government scholarships.
35. The non-governmental organizations in Nepal had been playing an important role in addressing women's issues. They had been organizing literacy and skills development programmes in sewing, knitting, weaving and carpet-making. Moreover, a number of non-governmental organizations were active in launching legal education programmes with a view to generating awareness among women of their rights under the law.
36. He urged the United Nations to take the lead in providing equal opportunity to women to participate in decision-making processes at the United

(Mr. Gautam, Nepal)

Nations. The Secretary-General should make a greater effort to increase the number of women in the Secretariat and to attain employment targets set by the General Assembly.

37. Nepal attached importance to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) as an instrument for furthering the rights of women. Nepal had already ratified the Convention and he appealed to Member States that had not done so do likewise.

38. His Government commended the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) for its praiseworthy work on women's issues at the Rio Conference. Nepal also appreciated the support of its development activities provided by the United Nations system, particularly UNDP, the World Bank and UNICEF.

39. The forthcoming 1994 International Conference on Population and Development and the 1995 World Conference on Women would be important occasions on which to address women's issues. Also, the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights would provide an opportunity for a comprehensive discussion of women's rights issues. Nepal also commended the Commission on the Status of Women and CEDAW for their efforts to include women's human rights issues on the agenda of the forthcoming World Conference on Human Rights.

40. Mr. RANASINGHE (Sri Lanka) said that women's issues were no longer matters only of human rights or welfare; the social and economic potential of women had barely been tapped. Despite United Nations efforts, much remained to be done to ensure gender equality and bring women's issues into the mainstream of the development process.

41. For countries like Sri Lanka, where much had already been done to improve the lot of women, the obstacles were economic: the gap between awareness and action was due more to social and economic factors than to any value attached to gender. In Sri Lanka, for example, gender equality had gained ground even before the adoption of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies as a result of the pressure brought by grass-roots women's organizations, and questions of economic adjustment and competitiveness must not be allowed to erode the early advantages gained in developing countries. The empowerment of women required intervention by the public sector to prevent such erosion and make women effective partners in development. That was the essence of Sri Lanka's poverty alleviation programme and the message emanating from the First Ladies' Summit on the economic advancement of rural women and from UNCED. The willingness of the international financial institutions to recognize those human dimensions of development was welcome.

42. The Strategies and the themes of equality, development and peace remained the basis for action, and the mainstreaming of women's issues should encompass those themes. Such an approach at the fourth World Conference on Women would facilitate implementation of the Strategies and the formulation of an action-oriented agenda for the coming decade. It was essential for the

(Mr. Ranasinghe, Sri Lanka)

regional preparatory meetings to provide the necessary inputs to ensure the universal validity of the Conference.

43. As far as equality and development were concerned, while it would certainly be useful to address gender discrimination in international law, the priority task was to apply the legal framework already available; the promotion of legal literacy was therefore vital. Moreover, although the development process was considered gender-neutral, poverty could have a disproportionate effect on women. Poverty alleviation must therefore be pursued as another major priority. The national poverty alleviation programmes focused on rural women, and a separate ministry and a women's bureau had been established to provide policy inputs and act as a link between women at the grass roots and national policy planners. National plans were in fact the critical link between awareness and action, and UNIFEM was to be commended for its work in that area, particularly for its cost-effective approach, which enabled women to become self-reliant.

44. Sri Lanka looked forward to further cooperation with UNIFEM. It had also had a useful discussion with CEDAW in connection with its second periodic report. CEDAW had acknowledged Sri Lanka's sound legal framework and considerable achievements, but much remained to be done to translate legal rights into active participation by women. A women's charter had been drafted, and a committee was envisaged for monitoring its application. The objective was still the implementation of specific projects to bring women into the mainstream of society.

45. Efforts had also focused on education, nutrition and health care from early childhood. The countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation were currently implementing a Decade of the Girl Child, for girl children in the region were particularly vulnerable. The Sri Lanka Government had also taken specific initiatives for girl children.

46. The deplorable problem of violence against women could be overcome only by means of legal safeguards and understanding on the part of society. Women migrant workers also had to cope with violence, and the sending and receiving countries should cooperate to solve the problem. Sri Lanka was dealing with the issue on a bilateral basis and wanted such joint endeavours to develop further.

47. Mr. MAZLAN (Malaysia) said that credit must be given to the United Nations for taking a leading role in promoting the advancement of women. His Government had long acknowledged the importance of women's contributions to development and remained committed to enhancing their status. It had established a national policy for women and a special unit to coordinate and monitor its implementation. In Malaysia women enjoyed equal pay and education and training and job opportunities. As a result, their participation in the manufacturing and services sectors had risen considerably, while their contribution to agriculture had fallen.

(Mr. Mazlan, Malaysia)

48. A particularly interesting aspect of the report of the Secretary-General (A/47/337) was the concept of de jure and de facto equality. Many countries had achieved de jure recognition of women and their needs but de facto equality was often blocked by factors in the private domain. Governments were sometimes powerless to impose remedies, but the situation could be resolved by women themselves once Governments had made them aware of their rights. De facto equality often involved clashes with religious teaching and laws concerning inheritance, marriage and abortion which could not be changed overnight. The subject deserved study, with a view to smoothing the way for women to achieve equality with men.

49. The Secretary-General's report was somewhat disappointing in its discussion of the role of women in development and in the peace process. While it was true that poverty was not gender-neutral, the report failed to prove that women were not benefiting from development to the same extent as men. And although it asserted that women should be involved in national planning, it did not explain how that would have the effect of changing the situation. The failure to adduce evidence weakened the report's assertions. It also seemed to imply that the world would be a better place if women had been involved in the peace process at the decision-making level; that was a purely hypothetical statement. Women should certainly take part in the peace process but not on the ground that they could do better than men.

50. His delegation welcomed the report of UNIFEM and noted from the report of the Secretary-General (A/47/508) the improvement of the status of women in the Secretariat. While it was difficult to find suitable candidates when equitable geographical distribution had to be taken in account, the Secretariat should seek to expedite the process so that the 1995 targets could be met.

51. While Malaysia remained committed to the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies and to the work of the Commission on the Status of Women, it shared the concern about the slow progress in implementation of the Strategies. It was to be hoped that the fourth World Conference on Women would adopt measures for their full implementation. The Conference should explore emerging issues, including the need to strengthen the family unit, but it should not shift the focus from the Strategies themselves. The preparations for the Conference must be broadly based and regional meetings should be held, with the participation of public and private sectors, including non-governmental organizations.

52. Ms. SEMAFUMU (Uganda) said that women's full participation in society would not be achieved unless the efforts to remove the obstacles to their advancement were intensified. Women suffered double discrimination in the developing countries, which bore the brunt of an inequitable international order. There was no guarantee that the laws safeguarding women's rights would be enforced, and the experience of women in developed countries showed that development did not necessarily guarantee their equal participation in

(Ms. Semafumu, Uganda)

political life. Despite the progress made since International Women's Year and the adoption of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies, there had been little change in the situation of most women. For example, the maternal mortality rate of 290 per 100,000 live births for developing countries showed that no breakthrough had been made in promoting the right to life. And inadequate access to education remained a major obstacle, for education was the most effective weapon in improving the status of women.

53. The difficulty encountered by the United Nations in increasing the number of women at the decision-making levels confirmed that leadership positions remained a male preserve. The restructuring exercise and ban on recruitment made it unlikely that the 1995 targets would be attained. In connection with the theme of peace, it should be remembered that disproportionate numbers of refugees and displaced persons were women and children. In those circumstances the reiteration of the Nairobi objectives of equality, development and peace for the fourth World Conference on Women demonstrated that those objectives had not been achieved. Her delegation endorsed the four items of the agenda for the Conference and thought that particular attention should be given in the preparatory process to institutional arrangements for the implementation of the Platform for Action. What was needed was not new mechanisms but a redirection of the existing ones.

54. At the Nairobi Conference the lack of institutions for the advancement of women had been identified as a major impediment. Now the United Nations had an array of bodies working for the advancement of women, and specialized institutions had been set up at the national level. The successes and failures of that new machinery reflected the gap between professed commitment and the actual situation of women. The World Conference on Women must examine that situation thoroughly, or risk degenerating into preaching to the converted.

55. The machinery had two general flaws. Firstly, there was insufficient integration of activities, and greater efforts must be made in that area. Secondly, there was the failure to integrate women into the mainstream of society. It was not sufficient to articulate women's problems, and the machinery could not be expected to operate outside the context which prompted its creation. The danger of marginalization of the new institutions had been underestimated: they debated women's issues at length, but in the rest of society it was business as usual. CEDAW had made commendable efforts to monitor the implementation of the Convention and to improve the status of women, but notwithstanding those efforts women's rights had not received greater attention in the mainstream, i.e., in the Commission on Human Rights.

56. Her delegation was aware of UNIFEM's inspiring achievements, but it had not made a dramatic difference in the lives of most women. Moreover, women's concerns had yet to be integrated in the development activities of the United Nations. A similar parallel could be drawn between INSTRAW and United Nations research activities. There must be a closer focus on the system-wide

(Ms. Semafumu, Uganda)

medium-term plan as a means of bringing the activities of those bodies into the mainstream.

57. At the national level women's institutions were often the first victims of cuts in public expenditure, and in some instances democratization eroded their influence, for they were seen as an undemocratic form of affirmative action. Therefore, early in the preparations for the World Conference a thorough analysis must be made of the operation of the machinery for the advancement of women at all levels. The Secretary-General should comply with the request made by the Commission on the Status of Women that the Secretary-General for the Conference should be appointed by the end of 1992. In the meantime, the opportunities offered by the preparatory processes of the several other forthcoming conferences must be fully exploited.

58. Ms. CAPELING-ALAKIJA (Director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women) said that delegations wanted the advancement of women to become an integral part of the reform of the United Nations for reasons not only of equity but also of effective management. In that regard the establishment of the Commission on Sustainable Development presented an immediate opportunity for change.

59. The United Nations had played a critical role in bringing legitimacy to the issue of violence against women, and many delegations had emphasized that violence was a major obstacle to the realization of women's rights and their participation in development. UNIFEM would strengthen its efforts in that area, particularly with regard to the plight of women refugees.

60. The Division for the Advancement of Women would need strong financial support in preparing for the 1995 World Conference. The NGOs and women's groups, in South and North, must be involved in the preparatory process. The year of the Conference also marked the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations and the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies. It was to be hoped that in 1995 women in the Secretariat would be able to celebrate the attainment of the staffing targets set by the General Assembly. But it was even more important to go to the Conference with concrete solutions to development problems which would bring hope and results for the millions of women living in poverty.

The meeting rose at 8 p.m.