



UNITED NATIONS

Press Release Economic and Social Council

Department of Public Information • News Coverage Service • New York
Commission on Status of Women
Thirty-ninth Session
7th Meeting (AM)
WOM/821
21 March 1995

ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES IMPEDE IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGIES FOR ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN. SPEAKERS TELL COMMISSION ON STATUS OF WOMEN

Difficult national and international economic conditions impede the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, speakers told the Commission on the Status of Women this morning as it reviewed progress in such implementation.

The representative of Guinea-Bissau said that the deterioration of the country's economy made it difficult to implement the Strategies. Solidarity between developed and developing countries was imperative for improving women's lives. The representative of Angola said that civil war in her country had destroyed the economy and had resulted in the displacement of many women and children.

Describing the situation of women in the central and eastern European region, the representative of the Slovak Republic said that women who had previously been active in such fields as science, technology and agriculture now found themselves without work as a result of the transition to a market economy. Soon, she said, those women would have to live on inadequate pensions and would be added to the growing number of women worldwide living in marginalized circumstances.

The representative of Uganda said that in his country, the collective approach to AIDS was empowering women to be agents of change, rather than victims. Women had responded to the crisis by forming voluntary associations known as munno mukabi, which translated as "a friend in need". Those associations provided support during sickness and death, and worked to integrate orphans into the community.

Statements were also made by the representatives of Portugal, Italy, Paraguay, Israel, Norway (on behalf of the Nordic countries), Iraq, Mauritius, India, Russian Federation and the Republic of Korea. The Observer for Palestine also spoke, as did a representative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Also taking part in the discussion were representatives of the following non-governmental organizations: National Institute of Womanhood; International Council of Women; Development Alternatives for Women for a New Era (DAWN); and Asia Pacific NGO Women's Caucus. A representative of the Commonwealth Secretariat also spoke.

The Commission will meet again at 3 p.m. today to continue its consideration of the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies.

(more)

For information media—not an official record

Commission Work Programme

The Commission on the Status of Women met this morning to continue its discussion on monitoring the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women. For its consideration of the item, the Commission has before it a report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations bodies and institutions concerned with crime prevention, including the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, the Ninth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders and its regional preparatory meetings, the Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Branch of the United Nations Office at Vienna and the United Nations interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) (E/CN.6/1995/9).

Also before the Commission is a report of the Secretary-General on the steps to be taken by the Division for the Advancement of Women to ensure that relevant human rights mechanisms of the United Nations regularly address violations of the rights of women, including progress in preparing a joint work plan on women's human rights for the Centre for Human Rights and the Division E/CN.6/1995/13). The report describes measures taken by both the Division and the Centre, discusses possible additional steps and concludes with a proposed joint work plan for 1995.

Statements

ROSINA WILTSHIRE, Manager, Gender in Development Programme of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), said the recent United Nations global conferences had all emphasized the need for a fundamental rethinking of development and the central role that women could play in reshaping the new development vision. The centrality of gender issues would be the focus of the 1995 Human Development Report.

The gender approach in development did not only focus on women's issues but on men's concerns as well. The critical issues identified in the draft platform for action were of concern to all of society, not only women. "Women and men have to work together to solve these issues", she said.

On the practical implications of the gender approach, three issues needed to be stressed: capacity-building in developing appropriate gender analysis tools, techniques and data; the need for adequate resources to support planning, programming and implementation; and an effective monitoring framework for implementation. Equality within the United Nations itself was a precondition for the effectiveness of the system. Furthermore, it was important to strengthen the linkages between governments, non-governmental organizations, grass-roots and community-based organizations.

KURASIN SUMHADI, President of the International Council of Women, said the endorsement of the draft platform for action in Beijing should be followed by concrete and concerted actions at the international, national and grass-roots levels. Governments must accelerate their efforts to realize a partnership with non-governmental organizations.

(more)

She said that the International Council of Women had always been concerned with women in poverty, inequalities in education and employment opportunities, inadequate access to health care services for women, and habitat and environment. A gender perspective must permeate all approaches to those issues. Conflict resolution had a key role to play to prevent violence against women in the family and the workplace.

The International Council of Women would continue to build its strength on the diversity of cultures and to work together with other non-governmental organizations in the global women's movement to build a better and more sustainable world for all.

CECILIA ACEVEDO ROYALS, of the National Institute of Womanhood, said a woman's reproductive nature seemed her great oppressor in many developing countries. Women had become victims of their own nature through policies that emphasized the use of contraception, abortion and sterilization. During the Population Conference in Cairo, women had found a "contraceptive imperialism". In many developing countries, such as in India, sterilization had become the Government's policy. Clinics were packed with condoms rather than with medicines that were badly needed for children.

"Today, no woman in her right mind would want to have eight children", she said. Women who bore more than two children were marginalized. There was a growing consensus that contraceptive policies were really "tools of oppression". The fear of women's reproduction was degrading and unacceptable, she emphasized.

PEGGY ANTROBUS, of Development Alternatives for Women for a New Era (DAWN), said she was amazed at people who seemed to speak on behalf of third world women in the absence of any consultation with those women. Alternatives were needed to the dominant development models. The trend towards increasing poverty had been accompanied by the exclusion of many from the benefits of development. Women were the majority of the poor. Poverty and violence were matters of supreme concern to women.

The draft platform for action failed to address the structural causes of those problems, including market-driven structural adjustment programmes that put the interests of capital growth before the interests of people, she said. No programme of action which sought to address the issues of poverty, education and health would be credible in the absence of an enabling economic environment. The Conference must guarantee women the means and mechanisms to participate in defining solutions to deteriorating standards of living. Women were ready to play their part in defining the development agenda for the twenty-first century.

ELENI STAMIRIS, Director of the Women's and Youth Affairs Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat, said the Commonwealth had developed a draft plan of action to achieve gender equality by the year 2000. The draft covered human rights and the elimination of violence against women; women's participation in democratic political processes; maintenance of peace and conflict resolution; gender-sensitive macroeconomic policies; and women's role in sustainable

(more)

development, poverty reduction and the management of technology. The draft plan would ensure that actions taken by governments and the Commonwealth Secretariat would be well-coordinated and complementary. It also sought to foster collaboration on gender issues with all institutions of the Commonwealth and the non-governmental organizations. The draft should be approved in June.

In addition to the draft plan, the Commonwealth was carrying out other supportive activities in such areas as science, technology and mathematics education; educational responses to structural adjustment; and promoting the role of women in economic decision-making, including through training programmes in macroeconomic policies for senior officials. Efforts were also being made to increase women's participation in election observer missions and conflict resolution activities. In the area of poverty alleviation, the Commonwealth was undertaking activities relating to agro-processing and food security. Numerous activities were planned in preparation for the World Conference on Women, such as a workshop on "women transforming politics -- issues, problems and strategies for action".

GALINA KLIMAN (Russian Federation) said achieving the advancement of women was difficult due to her country's current transition to a market economy. Approximately 48 per cent of children in her country lived in needy households. Policies to aid the needy and poor had started. For example, a labour code was being considered by Parliament. The traditional system of giving all child-rearing responsibilities to women would soon change.

Violence against women was a matter of great concern in her country. Part of the problem was the lack of legal awareness and of legislation to protect women. The eradication of poverty, the improvement in health care and education were all important areas for the countries with economies in transition. The importance of supporting women entrepreneurs had also been emphasized by her Government.

MARIA REGINA TAVERES DA SILVA (Portugal) said that her country had registered gains for women in the areas of health and education, but difficulties still persisted for women in the labour market. "The whole picture in Portugal is as contradictory as it is at the international level." It was hoped that the Beijing Conference would provide new impetus to the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies.

The challenges ahead required more than identifying new strategies; it would be necessary to view equality issues in light of the new philosophy which had been progressively defined in recent years. That philosophy had been developed at the various world conferences, such as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994) and the World Summit for Social Development held earlier this month in Copenhagen. All of those conferences had examined a range of subjects, with due account paid to women's issues.

(more)

The most fruitful way to address the concerns of women was to place them in the broader context of human rights, she said. Violence was the denial of fundamental human rights; poverty was the denial of basic economic and social rights; and the absence of women from power and decision-making was not only a matter of justice or fair treatment, it was also a matter of civil and political rights. The human rights of women should not just be one of the key areas of the draft platform for action; rather, it should be the framework which defined all areas and gave full meaning to all actions.

OPIKA OPOKA (Uganda) said that peace was a pre-requisite to social and economic development. In Uganda, the process of peaceful resolution of internal conflict had increasingly involved women at all levels. In the past, the denial of human rights had been a major concern in Uganda. In response, the Government had established an independent human rights commission where women could report violations. Efforts had also been made to sensitize military and law enforcement officials about human rights. Uganda was the only African country to have a woman vice-president. That was part of a steady movement to achieve a critical mass of women in decision-making positions in the political field. The process of democratization in Uganda had presented women with a unique opportunity to define and shape new political structures.

Uganda, he said, had been one of the first countries to have an open policy on AIDS prevention. "We have approached the AIDS pandemic candidly and seriously." Women had responded to the crisis by forming voluntary associations known as munno mukabi, which translated as "a friend in need". Those associations provided support during sickness and death, and worked to integrate orphans into the community. The collective approach to AIDS was empowering women to be agents of change, rather than victims.

KAHDIJE ABU-ALI, observer for Palestine, said the upcoming World Conference on Women should reaffirm the international community's commitment to the implementation of the Nairobi Strategies.

Even though the cold war had ended, there were still 500,000 women dying every year. In addition, Arab women were still suffering due to occupations and wars. The Secretary-General's report on the status of the Palestinian people, indicated the improvement in the lives of Palestinian women since the peace process with Israel had begun. The report stated that many women had been subjected to violence both during raids on their homes and when imprisoned. Palestinian women could not openly speak about those violations.

Despite the peace process, many detentions and destruction of homes continued to occur. Furthermore, many new settlements had been established. Palestinian women had taken steps to learn the law and to understand the peace process. A new assessment of their traditional customs had been made. "There is a hidden power of women for peace", she said. Men alone were not able to preserve the peace.

ALMA CAPPIELLO (Italy) said that in the wake of the 1985 Nairobi Conference, her Government had taken numerous steps to achieve gender

equality, including establishing a national commission on equality. That commission was working on national preparations for the Beijing Conference. It had elaborated a national action plan containing new policies on welfare and the support of single-parent female-headed households. The plan also called for non-sexist educational policies. By approving the plan, Italy's Parliament would reform laws against rape occurring both inside and outside the family.

She went on to say that particular attention must be paid to publicizing the results of the Beijing Conference through a precise strategy. Much of the Conference's success would depend on how women's issues were covered by the international media. Women must be made aware of their rights and of their dignity, for only then could they fully participate in the decision-making process and make a concrete contribution to solving the problems of their respective countries. If women were to lose, humanity would lose. "So let us muster up our forces and march forward and -- why not? -- let us return to a little healthy competition with men."

ESTHER PRIETO (Paraguay) said a modern and democratic Constitution had been adopted in her country. It sought, among other things, full equality between men and women. In addition, a draft reform of the electoral code was currently under consideration which would provide women with equitable access to elected office.

The establishment of a secretariat for women in her country was aimed at providing women equal opportunity in every aspect of their lives, including employment and education. Also, educational reform which sought a non-sexist educational system was also under way. The reform would especially benefit rural women. Policies to improve the political participation of women and to punish those who used violence against women were also being implemented. Peace could only be built on the basis of respect for human rights, she said.

OKSANA TOMOVA (Slovak Republic) said that throughout the world, women's contribution was not accurately reflected in statistics. Women lacked access to capital and credit. They were not adequately participating in governance at the international, regional, national or local levels. Many women were faced with the daily fact of violence in their lives because of harmful traditions, customs, religious or cultural practices or armed conflict. Women must be involved in the process of establishing a lasting peace so that the next century would be a century of growth and prosperity, not a century of destruction and poverty.

She said that as the Slovak Republic was undergoing the transition to a market economy, a disproportionate number of women were being denied management positions or were losing their jobs. The transition process involved cuts in social programmes which harmed women, especially elderly women and those living in rural areas. Probably one of the most unique characteristics of the central and eastern European region was the fact that there were highly educated and skilled women who had been active in such fields as science, technology and agriculture that currently found themselves without work. They now faced a lower standard of living and lacked social

(more)

protections previously available to them. Soon, they would have to attempt to live on inadequate pensions, and would be added to the growing number of women worldwide living in marginalized circumstances.

SHARON SHENAV (Israel) said her Government had passed an amendment to the Law of Government Companies which required that the board of directors of every company reflect gender parity. That was a clear mandate for affirmative action on behalf of women. In addition, in order to support women and their businesses, the Government provided loans to small businesses.

An increasing number of rural women had moved into entrepreneurship in the last few years. For that reason, a female economist had been appointed to set up courses and projects within the Ministry of Agriculture to enable rural women to successfully operate small businesses. The economic empowerment of women would provide the basis for achieving gender equality.

ANTONIA MENDES TEIXEIRA (Guinea-Bissau) said women in her country still suffered discrimination in the workplace. The deterioration of her country's economy which had resulted in high inflation and slow economic growth had also made it difficult to implement the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies. Women's progress in the political, economic and social spheres had been slow. In addition, many girls had to work to aid their families.

The mobilization of internal and external resources was necessary to improve the status of women as was solidarity among developing countries. Also, appropriate funds were necessary to integrate women in the development process, both when formulating policies and in implementing them.

SISSEL SALOMON (Norway), speaking on behalf of the Nordic countries, said it was essential to include gender perspectives when formulating all policies. Awareness of the role of men as allies for changing male-oriented structures was essential. The entire United Nations human rights machinery must apply a gender perspective to such issues as torture, disappearance, slavery or warfare. In the United Nations, as in its Member States, special mechanisms for the advancement of women were important but were not enough. Governments must ensure that gender perspectives were built into all fields of policy-making: "Unless we look specifically at women as economic actors, economic progress may either pass women by or be directly harmful to them."

She stressed that the human rights elements in the draft platform for action must be strengthened. The empowerment of women and the full realization of their potential contribution would greatly influence the political agenda. The transformation of gender relations would benefit not only women, but society as a whole.

MARIA GRACA LOPES (Angola) said civil war had caused the destruction of her country's economy and the displacement of citizens of which the majority were women and children. Added to that was the cultural tradition which considered women as second-class citizens. Discrimination was notorious in her country. In spite of that, the Government had made efforts to increase the number of women in the executive and legislative bodies.

Domestic violence, incest and genital mutilation were the worst forms of violence against women in her country. Furthermore, young women were still the victims of discrimination because many were married off prematurely; few women finished schooling. In addition, lack of sanitary conditions aggravated the situation in which most women lived.

KHALID AL-HITTI (Iraq) said women in his country enjoyed equality with men. Iraq adhered to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Legislation had been enacted in pursuance of the goals of the Forward-looking Strategies and children benefitted from free child care. Trade unions had been particularly active in the cause of advancing the status of women. The number of women elected to Parliament in the most recent elections had totalled 27 -- more than ever before.

The negative impact of the economic blockade against Iraq had been felt most by women, he said. The gravest problem facing Iraqi women was the lack of pharmaceutical and medical products which caused dozens of women to die each day. Disease had spread, and many Iraqis were forced to drink non-potable water because they lacked water purifiers. The lack of pharmaceuticals and medical supplies had caused infant mortality rates to soar.

The lack of food also affected children, he said. Anaemia was spreading as a result of inadequate nutrition. Low birth weights were very common. Iraqi women and children faced extremely difficult situations. The lack of food and medicine for women and children in Iraq constituted a flagrant violation of their human rights and the economic blockade was resulting in famine and genocide. The Beijing Conference must examine the issue of sanctions, so that their victims would not feel forgotten.

SHEILA BAPPOO, Minister for Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare of Mauritius, said women constituted a high number of those participating in the labour force in her country. In spite of that, few women were managers and directors in private businesses. Also, few women had knowledge of technology and sciences. To correct that situation, the Government had produced a White Paper on women in development which set out an agenda for future action, especially on the issue of equality in the economic and political empowerment of women. As a result of that, the unpaid sector was increasingly being recognized. Also, more girls were studying sciences and efforts were being made to ensure that careers choices were free of gender discrimination. Furthermore, the recruitment of women in male dominated sectors, such as the police force, was being increased.

LATA SINGH (India) said her country's strategy for empowerment took into account the fact that 90 per cent of women working in India were employed in the informal sector. Some 40 per cent of all development assistance was earmarked for women. Over 80,000 women's groups had been organized for income-generating activities. A large network of vocational training institutions had been established. In addition, a national credit fund for women had been set up to channel funds through non-governmental organizations to women working in the informal sector. Thousands of women had benefitted from that fund. India had a conscious policy of providing support services to

working women. In rural areas and in slums, the integrated child development scheme, which catered to over 16 million children, was being implemented to the benefit of mothers.

India aimed to integrate the gender perspective into all aspects of education, she said. Education for women's equality was also provided, including through redesigned textbooks. Priority was attached to removing gender differentials in literacy levels. Women had been very active in teacher training programmes. They were transforming themselves from passive observers to active participants in the educational process. Special attention must be paid to girls, who often lacked equal access to education. Major efforts had been made to provide incentives to keep girls in school. India reserved a significant portion of political post at the local level for women, thus facilitating their participation in the decision-making process.

YUNG CHUNG KIM (Republic of Korea) said her Government fully supported the efforts made to improve the collaboration between the Commission on the Status of Women and the Centre for Human Rights. She welcomed the proposal for establishing a human rights section within the Division for the Advancement of Women. Furthermore, she supported the establishment of the post of a special rapporteur on violence against women. A symposium had recently been held in her country to raise public awareness of women's fundamental rights.

PAM RAJPUT, of the Asia Pacific NGO Women's Caucus, said that the feminization of poverty in the region was exacerbated by market-oriented structural reforms. She urged the international community to ensure women's rights to a sustainable livelihood, with special attention to the rights of indigenous women. Women's unremunerated work should be included in national accounts. Fifty per cent of national budgets and 75 per cent of official development assistance should go directly to women. Cuts in military spending were essential. All countries should immediately ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. "We have met long enough; it is time for commitments and action."