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PROPOSALS FOR STRENGTHENING ACTION PLATFORM HEARD AT PREPARATORY MEETING FOR WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN

The Commission on the Status of Women, acting as the preparatory body for the World Conference on Women, this morning heard proposals for strengthening the draft platform for action to be adopted at the Conference.

The draft platform was criticized as "weak and imprecise" by the representative of Sweden, who said that it presented an unacceptable image of women, not as important actors in the development of society, but rather as victims of processes from which they should be protected. The representative of Malaysia, expressing concern about the burden of poverty on women, said that the draft failed to address short-term goals to alleviate that problem.

Discussing the advancement of women in the United Nations common system, a representative of the Federation of International Civil Servants' Associations said that, despite innumerable declarations and resolutions, quantitative targets had not been achieved and underlying personnel processes had barely changed. He said that the United Nations, while convening the World Conference on Women, must lead by example. Its policies and the composition of its staff must reflect the principles that it advocated globally.

The representative of Algeria said that women in her country had suffered for denouncing religious extremism. Women had rejected the unjust, dictatorial and bloody society which was being evolved in Algeria. Religious extremism denied the true tenets of Islam, which was a religion of tolerance and peace. She called for references to the problem of religious extremism in the draft platform for action's section on violence against women.

The representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina also addressed the issue of violence against women, stressing that the crime of rape and sexual abuse of women in armed conflict, which had been carried out in her country, must be recognized, condemned and clarified as an act comparable to the crime of genocide. In Beijing, she said, it must be made clear that women victims of violence were not forgotten and that the perpetrators would be tried.

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For information media—not an official record

The representative of Haiti said that during the years of totalitarianism in her country, thousands of women had been raped. Repression had made it difficult for women to complain, and only after the return of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide had they been able to speak out. She stressed the importance of establishing mechanisms that would prevent rape.

Statements were also made by the representatives of Panama, Cyprus, United States, Samoa, Cambodia, Italy, United Arab Emirates, Brazil, Canada, Congo, Iran, Mozambique, Niger, Swaziland and Nigeria. Also taking part in the discussion were representatives of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Ad Hoc Inter-Agency Meeting on Women. The Director of Technical Cooperation and Focal Point for Women in Trade and Development of the International Trade Centre of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) also spoke.

At the outset of this morning's meeting, the Commission observed a moment of silence in memory of Flor Contemplacion, a Philippine woman who was hanged yesterday in Singapore.

The Commission on the Status of Women will meet again at 10 a.m. on Monday, 20 March, to continue its discussion of preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace.

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Commission Work Programme

The Commission on the Status of Women met this morning to continue its discussion on preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace (Beijing, 4-15 September). The Commission will discuss four reports by the Secretary-General on: the draft platform for action; the second review and appraisal of the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000; preparations for the Beijing Conference; and the 1994 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development. Reports from the five United Nations regional preparatory meetings held last year will also be before the Commission.

The draft platform for action (E/CN.6/1995/2) identifies 11 areas of concern and proposes strategic objectives and actions. The areas of concern deal with the burden of poverty on women; educational opportunities; health; violence against women; effects of armed conflicts; access to and participation in productive processes; power-sharing and decision-making; mechanisms to promote the advancement of women; women's human rights; mass media; and women's contribution to managing natural resources and safeguarding the environment. The international community, together with governments, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and academic and research institutions would implement the suggested actions in their areas of concern. The draft also deals with institutional and financial arrangements to help facilitate the attainment of the strategic objectives. (For background information, see Press Release WOM/812 of 13 March and WOM/813 of 15 March.)

FAOUZIA BOUMAIZA (Algeria) said women had achieved some progress in recent decades, but fundamental change had not taken place. The regional conference for Africa had adopted a platform for action which addressed the main concerns of women of that continent. Those concerns were largely represented in the draft platform for action. Improvement of the economic situation of women was essential to their progress. The economic crisis in Africa had been worsening as a result of indebtedness, structural adjustment programmes and armed conflicts.

Women in Algeria had suffered for denouncing religious extremism, she said. "We have stood up against religious terrorism." Women had rejected the unjust, dictatorial and bloody society which was being evolved in Algeria. Religious extremism denied the true tenets of Islam, which was a religion of tolerance and peace. Religious extremism caused human rights violations, especially among women. The draft platform for action, in its section on violence against women, should address the problem of religious extremism.

KARIN SHAM POO, Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), said the draft platform for action had not started from zero but was based on the conclusions of previous world conferences on women as well as on research and much work. Universal ratification of both the Convention on the Elimination All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child should be encouraged.

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"Promoting gender equality and the empowerment of girls and women greatly facilitates the achievement of the goals of the World Summit for Children", she said.

It was imperative to eliminate gender discrimination and provide girls with equal opportunities, she said, commitments needed to be action-oriented. Monitoring mechanisms and time-bound goals should be established. It was necessary to analyse the situation of women and girls in terms of gender relationships that determined and perpetuated inequality. The empowerment of women and their sharing of decision-making in the private and public spheres needed to become a reality. It was also important to recognize the role of non-governmental organizations as a key to the advancement of women.

MARY MORGAN-MOSS (Panama) said the promotion of the status of women was essential to creating a new global society. A humanitarian and compassionate approach was needed to solve the problems facing women. Eradicating illiteracy and improving women's access to education and technical training should be given top priority in the platform for action. Giving priority to educating women would yield benefits that could serve to overcome other problems. For its part, Panama would reassess the situation of indigenous women on its territory and would work to promote their rights. Women were masters of peace and should thus have fair and equal treatment. All victories by women in the political, environmental and social realms would lead to victories for all.

ERATO KOZAKOU-MARCOULLIS (Cyprus) said much had been accomplished in the advancement of women in theory, but not in practice. Discrimination was still a reality in many parts of the world. The platform for action needed to empower women through specific goals and actions. "The girls of today need to be equal partners of tomorrow's men", she said.

No existing world problem could be solved without the involvement of women, she said. Their exclusion would leave the world full of "half baked societies and half baked democracies". Achieving equality was essential for the advancement of civilization.

WAYNE R. DIXON, of the Federation of International Civil Servants' Associations, said that despite innumerable declarations and resolutions on the status of women in the United Nations system, quantitative targets had not been achieved and underlying personnel processes had barely changed. "There is a desperate need for a more results-oriented approach to women's issues and this approach is needed now."

He called for a number of measures to address the situation, including the establishment of a mechanism which would ensure managerial accountability for achieving gender goals. The best use should be made of openings offered by the current process of reorganization. Staff rules and working practices should be examined so as to remove discrimination against staff members with family responsibilities. In a few months, the World Conference on Women would

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adopt recommendations on advancing the status of women. The United Nations must lead by example. Its policies and the composition of its staff must reflect the principles that it advocated globally.

FATIMAH HAMIDDON (Malaysia) said exploitation of women and violation of their human rights persisted "in every possible way". Women did not live in peace and there was no authority that made sure those violations did not occur. But hope should not be lost. A call for a ban on the proliferation of arms was necessary. Also, the Commission needed to come up with an acceptable platform for action which addressed real issues of the coming age. The platform should be action- and commitment-oriented and not "a wordy document, repetitive of past conferences". The current draft was too long. Universalism, and the empowerment of all people, irrespective of their religion or race, needed to be encouraged.

The persistent burden of poverty was worrisome and the draft platform for action did not address short-term goals, she said. It was imperative to reduce poverty by at least 50 per cent by the next century. Also, the platform needed to adopt the recommendations of the Economic and Social Council.

AMELA SAPCANIN (Bosnia and Herzegovina) said the issue of violence against women, to be addressed at the World Conference, was very important to Bosnia, a country which was the victim of brutal aggression against the civilian population, especially women, children and the elderly, who were most vulnerable. While the international community looked forward to the advancement of women, Bosnian women had been stripped of their rights to development in any conceivable sense. They were living under harsh winter conditions in besieged towns. Rape was being used as an instrument of war. Before development and equality, there must be peace.

The crime of rape and sexual abuse of women in armed conflict had been carried out in Bosnia -- the heart of Europe -- unabated, she said. The women of Bosnia questioned how there could be concentration camps resurfacing in the world. "The time is now and the place is Beijing to take a firm stand and condemn all forms of violence against women." It was necessary to create more efficient mechanisms to protect women and eradicate such violence.

Despite the lack of resources and the continuing aggression, Bosnia continued to provide counselling and help to women victims of violence, she went on. The country's 47 women's organizations had become a non-governmental federation called "Phoenix", the mythical bird that rose from the ashes. They had organized numerous activities, including a seminar to be held in May in Sarajevo on affirmative action for women. Bosnian women had chosen to battle back from their victimization. They were offering solutions, taking stands and developing policies.

Based on its tragic experience, Bosnia felt that the international community must recognize, condemn and clarify rape as not a mere product of war, but as an act comparable to the crime of genocide. That would bring moral satisfaction to those who had suffered. In Beijing, it must be made

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clear that women victims of violence were not forgotten and that the perpetrators would be tried.

MARJORIE MARGOLIES MEZVINSKY (United States) said recognizing women's rights was not enough. Governments needed to respect women's human rights. Also, it was necessary for the platform to specify actions to end all forms of violence against women and support programmes that informed women of their basic human and legal rights as well as provided them with tools to exercise them.

The platform for action needed to address the full spectrum of health and nutrition needs of all women, ensuring equity in research, prevention, education and services. It needed to give special attention to breast and cervical cancer; the health needs of menopausal and older women; and address issues related to sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS.

In regard to employment and income earning, the platform for action needed to identify ways to put money and other resources, including property and inheritance rights, into the hands of women. In order to be effective, it was necessary for the platform to highlight the underlying social, economic, political and legal barriers that impeded women's advancement.

It was important for non-governmental organizations to continue participating in major meetings which dealt with women's issues, she said. "NGOs have played major roles in designing and implementing actions to advance the status of women."

FOISAGA ETEUATI-SHON (Samoa) said that the centrality of the family as the cornerstone of society was not adequately reflected in the draft platform for action. In Pacific cultures, the family had a unique role. The concept of the family should be emphasized in recognition of the importance of the role of women in the family structure. Without such recognition, no progress for women's rights would be achieved.

As a small island country, Samoa was greatly concerned with environmental problems such as global warming and rising sea levels which threatened the very existence of Samoans, she said. Women in Samoa adopted a common-sense approach to environmental practices, and they were being strongly encouraged to participate in the process of decision-making on environmental matters. The Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States adopted at the global conference on that issue should be taken into account in the draft platform for action.

KEAT SUKUN, the Secretary of State for Women's Affairs of Cambodia, said a special programme had been established in his country to address the issues raised at the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference in Jakarta. The advancement of women was the driving force for development and national reconciliation.

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Women did not participate in decision-making mainly because of their lack of access to higher education. Male domination was excessive in the society. The role of non-governmental organizations was crucial in ensuring progress in the advancement of women.

SIMONETTA SOTGIU (Italy) said the draft platform for action should stress the need for equal participation of women and men in the judiciary. Governments should adopt legal measures that would support actions by non-governmental organizations. They could also support women's rights through State-run television. Non-governmental organizations could support the cause of women through various channels, such as schools. Governments should establish bodies to monitor the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, and should fight any discrimination not being dealt with in civil or criminal courts. Development would only be possible through equal opportunity for men and women in political, social and family life.

MOZAH AL-HABROUSH, the Director of the Women's Union of the United Arab Emirates, said that in 1980, women represented 31 per cent of the total population in her country and their participation in the labour force was only 5.3 per cent. That percentage had increased to 16.3 in 1990. The percentage was low compared to developed countries, but if measured by the standards of the societies in the region, it was quite an achievement.

Female students constituted 68.4 per cent of university students, she said, and women occupied 40 per cent of the posts in the ministries. In spite of all the advances, however, much remained to be done. National committees had been established to further advance the cause of women.

CHARLOTTE VON REDLICH (Sweden) said her country was actively preparing for the Conference. It was a matter of regret that the Commission's documents had been issued late. That had impeded the work of both Governments and non-governmental organizations. In spite of the goal of having a short and concise platform for action, the draft contained 246 often extensive paragraphs. It was too weak and imprecise. Further, the draft presented a rather unfortunate image of women, not as the important actors in the development of society, but rather as victims of processes that they should be protected from. Sweden could not accept such a presentation of women. Nor would it accept discussion of equality between women and men as a "woman's issue".

The platform for action should reflect the responsibility of governments for political, economic and social development in their societies, which would lead to equality between women and men, she said. Recognizing uneven power relations between women and men at all levels and all spheres was a vital precondition to change. That would require addressing the role of men and their willingness to share power and responsibility for the achievement of goals.

Particularly important were the issues of decision-making, the human rights of women and women in the economy, since they had a bearing on all

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other areas, she stated. Another critical issue was the burden of poverty on women. Improving the status of women was crucial to the eradication of poverty.

TEREZA QUINTELLA (Brazil) said Member States should concentrate on the essential issues. The advancement of the condition of women worldwide had not occurred as fast as desired. And the goals of equality, development and peace had not been achieved. The time for analysis was over; in Beijing, governments needed to take actions. A real partnership between men and women was needed.

Full citizenship for women had been achieved in her country, she said, but poverty, violence and impunity were still of great concern. "Without economic independence, women will not achieve equality", she said. Also, the existing judicial system was not adequate for ensuring equality. The adoption of new legislation was a high priority.

VALERIE RAYMOND (Canada) said the late publication of the documents had made it difficult to examine them thoroughly. The draft platform for action must fully reflect the many important gains achieved by women for women. Significant agreements adopted at other United Nations conferences should be reflected in the draft. They should be consolidated and used as a starting point for future action.

She stressed the need to value diversity among women. Many women faced barriers because of their race, age, class, religion, language or disability, among other factors. Numerous countries, including Canada, were facing fiscal constraints. However, sound investment in gender equality was an essential prerequisite for full development both domestically and internationally. Women's perspectives and concerns should be reflected in all matters. Policies related to economic restructuring must take account of their impact on women. They should also reflect the full contribution of women's labour -- both paid and unpaid. International financial institutions must address gender equality in all of their programmes.

Governments had the primary responsibility for implementing the platform for action in their countries, she continued. All actors in civil society must make a commitment to working in partnership for gender equality.

MARIE-THERESE AVEMEKA, the Minister in Charge of the Integration of Women and Development in Congo said a forum for women had taken place in her country last December, and a seminar on "gender and development" had been held in February. A national programme of action had subsequently been adopted for the integration of women in development.

Poverty in the African region was worrisome, she said, and the burden of debt and the financing of programmes should be addressed at the upcoming Conference. Also, the existing mechanisms at the national, regional and international levels needed to be reinforced. She called for "a peaceful world based on equality".

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FATEMEH ARDENAH (Iran) said her country had achieved remarkable success in dealing with obstacles to the advancement of women. "This success has been due to the prevalence of religious values." Public belief about women and their status in society was fundamental to how women were treated. Iran had taken a number of measures to advance the status of women. The number of female representatives in its Parliament was increasing. Both governmental and non-governmental organizations were working to eradicate poverty by providing educational and vocational opportunities for women and by facilitating their access to credit. Those steps had led to an increase in the earnings of low-income women. Girls were attending school at a rate almost equal to that of boys.

She said that violence against women, such as that being perpetrated in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or that suffered by the Palestinians in the occupied territories, was a symptom of today's socio-cultural crisis. The United Nations must adopt a comprehensive perspective, employing consultants from all corners of the world with various cultural heritages in order to construct a support system for women.

ASSA GUAMBE (Mozambique) said that during the 1985 Nairobi Conference, her country had been in war. Since last year, peace had prevailed and thus the Nairobi strategies would now be implemented promptly. A draft report from her Government on the status of women would be available in Beijing. Violence against women was of great concern in her country and a programme to help women in that regard had been created. The girl-child issue was also one of her country's priorities.

HADJO ABDOULMOUMINE (Niger) said preparations for the Conference involving women from all sectors of society were well under way in Niger. Poverty, illness, disease and lack of housing affected women in particular. It was increasingly recognized that social progress was vital to peace. Economic factors such as the debt burden and falling commodity prices were hindering the advancement of women in Africa. Despite such obstacles, Niger was working for women's advancement in a number of ways.

The platform for action should reflect the concerns of the poorest women, she said. The outcome of various international conferences held in recent years should be taken into account. Strategies in the areas of health and education were of particular importance. Special attention should be paid to vulnerable women, such as those who were refugees. The efforts of non-governmental organizations must be supported because they were essential to women's progress.

CHRISTABEL MOTSA, Principal Home Economics Officer in the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (Swaziland) said women who were heads of households were usually the poorest of society. In her country, women had limited access to health services and to financial resources. The feminization of poverty was evident.

Her country's economy had greatly improved in the last few years, she continued, and complete gender equality in primary education had been

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achieved. Nevertheless, there were still signs of disparities among the different sections of the population. For example, almost a third of the children were undernourished. There was also inequality in the distribution of income. Women, in particular, had not benefited from the economic gains achieved since independence. A number of non-governmental organizations were participating in the country's efforts to improve women's status. However, traditional values still impeded women from speaking out when their rights were violated.

SAM A. OTUYELU (Nigeria) said that international cooperation was essential to addressing the concerns of women. One proposal which merited consideration was the provision of free medical care to children under the age of five. Special attention must be paid to helping the girl-child overcome stereotypes arising from negative cultural attitudes.

Nigeria had taken several steps to promote the advancement of women, but more effort was required to ensure that the gains achieved so far were reinforced, he said. Its new Ministry for Women's Affairs and Social Welfare had been established for that purpose. Other steps included the establishment of community and people's banks which made loans to people in rural areas under more flexible conditions than conventional banks. Many poor women benefited from such loans. Nigeria's literacy campaign had increased the enrolment of women in adult education programmes.

LISE MARI DEJEAN, Minister for the Rights of Women of Haiti, said that during the years of totalitarianism in her country, thousands of women had been raped. Only after the return of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide were women able to speak. Before, repression made it difficult to complain. She stressed the importance of establishing mechanisms that would prevent rape.

Power-sharing with men was difficult due to the feminization of poverty, she said. Much could be accomplished through women's participation in development. Her country was fighting against the sale of organs and sought access for women to new technologies. Women's health was a problem in her country, especially since 5 women in 1000 died as a result of pregnancies or lack of simple care. Her presence demonstrated the will of her Government to tackle the problems of women in her country and to work towards their progress.

LEENA M. KIRJAVAINEN of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), speaking on behalf of the Inter-Agency Meeting on Women, said that over 30 United Nations organizations had participated in the most recent meeting. Such meetings provided the opportunity for United Nations organizations to systematically inform each other of relevant activities and to embark on collaborative projects. During the recent meeting, participants began organizing joint events within the framework of the Beijing Conference and beyond. There was a vital role to be played by United Nations organizations in the implementation of declarations and programmes of action adopted at world conferences. In order for the United Nations to implement the draft platform for action, a system-wide mechanism with competence on gender issues should be established.

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INGRID I. VANORE-SPEER, Director of Technical Cooperation and Focal Point for Women in Trade and Development of the International Trade Centre of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), said that women must be given the opportunity to shape the economic policies that would affect them. The Centre's activities focused on business development for women entrepreneurs. For example, an umbrella programme on trade-related technical assistance to women entrepreneurs had been developed. The platform for action must take account of the potential contribution of women entrepreneurs. The draft should recommend policy measures for private sector development initiatives for women entrepreneurs in the external trade sector.

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