

STATEMENT BY CONCHITA PONCINI
International Federation of University Women
Brussels, 17 May 2001.

Thank you Mr. President,

I represent the International Federation of University Women, which has national associations in 71 countries and about 180,000 individual members and the International Federation of Business and Professional Women which has over 40,000 members and am president of the Geneva-based NGO Committee on the Status of Women of the CONGO (Conference of non governmental organizations), which has over 80 representatives of international NGOs composed of over 5 million members. So, you can see that we are a powerful coalition of international NGOs in consultative relations with the UN.

Within the context of globalization, an important feature of development is that women are the majority of workers in manufacturing sectors. Furthermore, the rapidly expanding international financial service sectors are also becoming female-intensive. Also in the face of economic crises and massive unemployment, women have proven their entrepreneurial capability and capacity to generate income through self-employment and through other forms of services in the informal sector as well as in creating their own small and medium/size enterprises. In other words, huge strides have been made by women in the money economy.

While women have undeniably improved in their status at household level, the pressure has been downwards in their earnings in view of their continuing double burden of unpaid and paid work. Today, women remain two-thirds of the world's poor population. The feminization of poverty is notable in the agricultural sector where women perform from 60-80 per cent in Africa, Asia and Latin America. This has been exacerbated by the absence of or diminishing social protection and social services. The nonrecognition and non-valuation of unpaid work has indeed been a critical factor in perpetuating gender inequality and women's impoverization as women tend to work twice and earn up to half less than men's income especially in least developed countries.

The Year 2001 is a significant year for women in many ways than just the beginning of a millennium. It is the first year of reckoning and benchmarking the Beijing Plus 5 Declaration and Platform for Action on women and the Plus 5 Copenhagen Declaration and Platform for Action on Social Development and this Conference on the Least Developed Countries is determinant in the implementation of economic and social inclusion of women and poverty eradication. The first challenge before us today is to identify and assess the many obstacles women have had to face and forced to overcome. We submit that this should be tackled in a holistic and comprehensive way at all levels of society. At the global level, the conceptual framework of the right to work and to the right to adequate standard of living as defined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights remains a male-based model and fails to reflect the many forms of women's activities that contribute to economic growth and the values they place on these. To be truly gender sensitive, these should be altered to encompass women's ways, patterns and attitudes that are quite different from the way men behave, value and work. Both gender have to be considered to make growth and development viable. The second challenge is the issue of access to land, property and credit, which has remained an acute problem notably for women of the South. It is imperative that de jure measures and de facto practices and attitudes be changed towards women, especially those who have projects that have economic growth potential and who are seeking credit. We urge local and national banks to become more open to women's needs. Women's banking, credit initiatives and revolving loans are some concrete solutions. However, the danger of marginalization should be avoided by extending and developing trust in women's ability to manage and to reimburse loans, which studies have shown are delivered between 90 to 100%. We commend the World Bank not only for having initiated the Micro-Credit summit but also for providing part of the concession lending to capital formation for women. This should be more comprehensive to include rural poor who are the most deprived.

Thirdly, we believe that there is a need for more focus on affirmative action programmes and strategies to cope with the sticky floors of low wages, glass walls that prevent lateral movements and glass ceilings that stop short women ascending in top decision-making positions. These apparent barriers from biased macroeconomic policies and employment practices exacerbate the exploitation and vulnerability of women due to their reproductive role. It is fundamental that gender equal codes of conduct and practices

should be promoted particularly laws that give women the right to organize and bargain collectively and to have freedom of choice and career opportunities. Implementing the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Labour Rights is a step forward in this direction.

Fourthly and the most critical factor towards gender inequality remains the mental attitudes and ignorance that perpetuate the notion that women have a secondary role in the economic and political arenas. Women and men have to be made aware that women's rights are embodied in existing international instruments notably economic, social and cultural rights and the right to development. It is not enough to have legislation guaranteeing protection but to enable them to use these to their advantage in optimizing their right to enjoyment of economic and social rights. Often their lack of awareness has penalized them for their ignorance, causing violence against them in the form of sexual harassment. Women in decision-making positions is essential to defend and promote those who have no means to be heard and recognized.

As specialists on gender equality, the Geneva-based Committee on the Status of Women call action to address the root causes of deprivation and violation of economic, social and cultural rights and the empowerment of women. UN and financial institutions should create an environment conducive to developing human capability and capacity to reach a decent standard of living in least developed countries and to enable them to perform better through training and lifelong education. We have been advocating for years to promote national and international systems of disaggregated data by gender and age because it is fundamental to bear in mind gender's intersectionality with race, ethnicity, culture, religion, minority groupings and other multiple disadvantages, which make women most vulnerable to poverty and powerlessness.

Finally, no visionary plan or action would be effective without political commitment and ownership of responsibility and accountability of governments. It is necessary to render visible best practices of synergetic action between NGOs, governments, UN bodies, notably the ILO, World Bank and of course UNCTAD.

I wish to remind everyone that this Conference, according to the DirectorGeneral of UNCTAD, Rubens Ricupero, is "about empowering women and men. It is about understanding women's and men's contribution to economic and social development and mechanisms that hinder this." I would add that it is in every individual and as a collective whole to make this possible through revisiting our values: to empower, we must give up some of our own. I ask, therefore, those here with power, to share theirs so that the economic and social gender gaps between women and men be closed.

Thank you.