

STATEMENT TO THE SECOND SESSION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL ON
Agenda Item on Progress Report of WG on the Universal Periodic Review
2 October 2006, Delivered by Conchita Poncini, (International Federation of University
Women

This is a joint statement of the following NGOs: International Federation of University Women, Femmes Africa Solidarité, Inter-African Committee, World Movement of Mothers, Pan Pacific and South East Asia Women's Association International, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, World Organization of Women, Women's World Summit Foundation, International Women's Rights Action Watch, Zonta International, World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women, Women's International Zionist Organisation, International Federation of Business and Professional Women, International Council of Women, African Commission on Health Promoters and Human Rights, International Alliance of Women, World Union of Catholic Women's Organisation, Institute for Planetary Synthesis, Soroptimist International, Women's Federation for World Peace International, Interfaith International, Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas.

The architecture for gender equality, the protection and promotion of women's rights and the improvement of their status in society, have at present been largely designed and virtually completed by various normative instruments, States declarations, platforms for action, such as, for example, the CEDAW and the Beijing PFA. Additionally, voluntary pledges have also contributed to embellishing this architecture such as the Ministerial Statements of women Foreign and other Ministers on Violence Against Women at the Commission on Human Rights and on Women's Political Empowerment at the Human Rights Council, both initiated by the Foreign Minister of Switzerland, Ms. Micheline Calmy-Rey.

This architecture unfortunately remains virtual. It has yet to become a reality by resolving asymmetries through political will of states to implement these normative instruments in their national legislation, policies and more concretely filling the gaps specifically through the Universal Periodic Review mechanism, the Special Procedures, the Expert Advisory Body formerly held by the Sub-Commission, and the various complaints procedures.

Some of these asymmetries include the following 8 points:

1. Women compared to men in top leadership and decision-making positions in the political sphere have not yet reached the critical mass of 30% on a worldwide scale and the glass ceiling is thick and tough to break- there are less than 5% of women holding chief executive and management positions;
2. A majority of women depend on men for their housing rights; a large population of women lack property and inheritance rights and in many cases have no right to dispose of the very income they earn from products of their own labour, consequently more women than men are at the threshold of the poverty line; Furthermore, women's unpaid work in the household is unrecognised and unvalued. According to UNIFEM, unpaid work amounts to 16 trillion dollars today from 11 trillion dollars in 1995; There has been little systematic gender and age statistics to provide indicators of gender-based impact of policies and practices;
3. Violence against women throughout their life from girlhood to adulthood is widespread globally through harmful traditional practices, cultural relativism, and domestic violence. The latter are usually free from impunity as they occur in the private sphere and are not covered by law;

4. Women are often considered vulnerable because of their reproductive role in society; their double burden in this role and as income earners are considered their sole responsibility and not of society nor a shared one with men as covered in the ILO Convention 156 on Work and Family Responsibilities;
5. On the whole, because of women's lack of legal knowledge and protection of their basic rights to their own sexuality, they become prey to HIV/AIDS and other sexually communicable diseases and maternal mortality;
6. Prostitution and human trafficking are emerging as forms of forced or bonded slavery and perpetrators remain unpunished;
7. Women have limited access to education in science, mathematics and computer science. Because of economic, social and cultural gender inequalities, there exists not only the digital divide but also a gender divide in Information Communication Technology;
8. Gender inequality intersects with age, race, ethnicity, disability so that women experience multiple discrimination because of their sex.

With the enumeration of the above gender imbalances, we hope that the Human Rights Council realizes the imperative need to keep on its agenda the integration of women's rights both as a specific item and throughout the entire agenda, as well as mainstreaming gender equality perspective in the UN system.

Taking gender equality seriously implies the strengthening of the competence and responsibility of the special procedures, treaty bodies and other mandate holders and stakeholders, to ensure that gender equality and women's human rights are dealt with in the context of economic and social development. It is also critical for the Office of the High Commissioner to provide technical assistance, training of trainers, capacity building and empowerment tools to women especially human rights education and legal literacy as well as gender awareness and sensitivity training to men.

Thank you

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