

**United Nations**  **Nations Unies**

**Commission on the Status of Women  
Fifty-fourth session**

I have the responsibility to respond on behalf of the UN system. It is both an honor and a tremendous challenge. A challenge because the statements from Member States were so rich and thought-provoking that it is difficult to do justice to all in the short time that I have.

During the 54<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission of the Status of Women, we are celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action which resulted from it. The great hope for a world without inequalities, shared by the thousands of participants at Beijing, was captured in this powerful “agenda for women’s empowerment”.

As the representative of Brazil noted, Beijing not only underlined 12 critical areas of concern to women’s lives, but it also succeeded in building a consensus among the thousands of participants (50,000 by one account), including delegates from 189 governments. Not to mention the representatives of NGOs and journalists, who to some extent provided a voice for the many others who were unable to attend. The truly international nature of the event is an achievement in itself; and evidence that the call for an end to discrimination against women resonates in the four corners of the globe.

The **Beijing** Conference signaled a new era in the way gender equality issues were treated in the international agenda. It not only shed a brighter spotlight on fundamental issues which are central to women’s lives, but it also changed the lens through which we view and perceive these issues.

Beijing announced a new approach to gender equality – starting with the introduction of the term gender equality itself. In 1981, the CEDAW had created the international legal architecture to legitimize women’s rights and dismantle discrimination. In Beijing, horizons were broadened. For the first time, there was a focus on empowering women, as opposed to “merely” eliminating discrimination. “Gender mainstreaming” was introduced and embraced as a key strategy to tackle gender inequalities in a comprehensive way.

Perhaps one of the most significant shifts in paradigm was the confirmation of the view, “that human rights are women’s rights and women’s rights are human rights,”

International work towards gender equality did not, of course, stop at Beijing in 1995. In the United Nations Millennium Declaration adopted by the General Assembly at the Millennium Summit in 2000, Member States confirmed their renewed commitment to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate sustainable development and peace. They also resolved to combat all forms of violence against women and to implement CEDAW.

Our task during the next few days is to reflect on the situation to assess where we are on the road to women’s empowerment and gender equality. We already heard from some of those who took the floor this afternoon that the road ahead sadly remains long 15 years after Beijing and 10 years after the Millennium Summit landmark discussions.

We also heard several encouraging stories from around the globe – some inspiring achievements, especially in the area of legislative frameworks - such as Canada, Norway, Philippines, Qatar, Colombia, Brazil, but the representatives of MS were also very frank about the gaps and remaining challenges. Speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China this morning, HE Ambassador Abdullah M. Alsaidi, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Yemen to the UN and Chairman of the Group of 77 informed us that [and I quote] “poverty still constitutes a major challenge for women especially in developing countries. Girls continue to account for the majority of children out of school and women remain a majority of those who are classified as illiterate.” He went on to say that problems remain in other critical areas including violence against women, access to labor markets, women’s representation in political and other decision-making for a at high levels, restrictions on women’s human rights, etc.

We heard that the Member States took note of the Beijing Platform for Action while discussing and drafting the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs, and reached an understanding that gender equality is both a goal in itself as well as a means towards the achievement of all of the Goals. It was also noted that although the linkages between the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the achievement of the MDGs are increasingly recognized at the policy-making level, more efforts are needed to translate this awareness into concrete action. Several Member States were concerned that we would not be able to achieve the targets set by the MDGs and they noted that there are no magic bullets to change things around.

Excellencies,

The 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Beijing Platform could not come at a more critical time. The world is struggling with crises of unprecedented gravity. The financial crisis, environmental and humanitarian crises (such as the tragic earthquake in Haiti and more recently in Chile), climate change and conflicts have exacerbated poverty levels, deepened inequalities, and heightened our awareness of the fragility of peace

seen as a time for *new* rather than lost opportunities; a time when gender equality can take on a central role in overcoming crises and establishing a new, more equal status quo. The question we should be asking as practitioners and policymakers is not how crises will have a negative impact on gender budgets

As the first step towards this goal, she has made education the center of her efforts as she believes that Education is the key to the achievement of gender equality, women's empowerment and all of the other Millennium Development Goals.

UNESCO's most recent global monitoring report found that gender parity in education is

The same is true of the relationship between women and **climate change**. As we watch our fragile Earth faltering, and women are often disproportionately affected by climate change, women are disproportionately represented among decision-makers and experts.

I would like to conclude by acknowledging the real progress that has been made by a united effort of the international community in advancing towards gender equality. However, we must be mindful that gender equality has yet to be achieved which implies that there is always the risk: the risk of taking one step back. The road traveled is not a one-way street. This could not be clearer as we meet in the shadow of the worst global economic crisis since 1929.

As the representative from Morocco noted, this is our wake-up call. Now more than ever the efforts need to be maintained.

What was special about the Beijing Conference and its Platform for Action was both the progressive and comprehensive vision and the international consensus on which it was based. Both of these ingredients remain more pertinent than ever, if we are to ensure that we remain two steps forward and do not take a single step back.

As a young girl wrote many years ago: *“How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world”*.

Thank you.