



IRELAND

Statement by

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Permanent Representative

55th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

Item 3. General Debate in continuation of the general debate
Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session
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Mr. Chairman,

Before turning to the specific items of this session, I would like to take a moment to commend the work of the Commission of CSW in its working process.

This is a moment both for great hope and great challenge of our transition and of our world. The CNW meets against a backdrop of extraordinary events and uncertainty in North Africa and the Middle East. An old order is crumbling, and long-faded voices are calling out for dignity, justice and basic human rights.

There will be many ways in which to engage with the lessons of the past, but there is one lesson to be underlined in the context of this Commission: the delay was for change that is sweeping the region, women have been on the front lines and have taken the lead. We have seen the messages, messages, the young women and the young men and taken to the streets with the same passion and fearlessness as men.

With the script beginning to be written for the next stage, we must ensure that the message resonate equally with male voices. As the transition is made from state to state-filled rooms, there will almost certainly be a re-orientation of the world.

It would be unforgivable if this were to be allowed, however, not just in terms of the erosion of women's rights that would be involved, but also in terms of the loss of vision and talent that are so urgently needed as these countries begin to chart their new futures.

The period ahead will be a test for the United Nations, a test of whether our motto and resolutions can connect with reality, and in particular, whether we can do so on the ground.

At this time of such change, we are fortunate that the UN has restructured in a way that greatly enhances the focus on women's empowerment of women who are among the great defining movements of the 21st century. UN Women's leadership, headed by Michelle Bachelet, will put the UN at the forefront of that movement.

Specific themes

Let me turn now to the key themes of this session: access to education and employment; and gender equality. Both themes, I would like to indicate an Irish perspective – sketch out some domestic initiatives and also some of the actions on which we are focusing in our development policy.

Gender equality is a key cross-cutting priority in our overall development policy. We recognise that gender equality is a human right and that eliminating discrimination against women and girls is essential to efforts to advance human development.

Access to Education and to Employment

The Irish education system is highly successful internationally; we know from our own experience the transformative effect on societies and economies of broadening access to education.

In terms of gender equality, we experience the same phenomenon as many other countries: girls outperform boys in the educational system generally but tend to opt more frequently for traditionally more feminised subjects.

In order to support our dynamic high-tech sector, Ireland has concentrated over recent years to strengthen the emphasis on encouraging girls to graduate in the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects. While the number of graduates in these fields has increased considerably, men continue to outnumber women. New strategies for the teaching of mathematics and science and technology subjects have recently been introduced with the hope that these will particularly benefit girls.

Consistent with our national experience, education is a central focus of our development policy. The multiplier effects of increasing the education levels of girls is well-established, and eliminating gender discrimination in access and retention rates at schools is a key element of Irish Aid's approach. A couple of concrete illustrations:

In Zambia, Ireland provides core support to the Government of Zambia education programme which addresses issues of access, quality and equity. In our dialogue with the Government, issues of gender equality and access to schooling for vulnerable children are central.

- In Mozambique, we have supported the development of a strategy to subvert the protection of girls from sexual exploitation and abuse as they travel to and from, and within schools. This strategy was first used in a single province and has now been approved by the Ministry of Education for use at a national level.

In both countries, MSII Aid also works with civil society in advancing these education priorities.

Discrimination and violence against the girl child

In this area too, Ireland has sought to ensure that our commitment to action at domestic level proceeds in parallel with a range of appropriate international development strategies.

Last year, we published our *Strategy on Domestic Violence Against Women*. The objective is that, by the end of 2015, there will be a societal acknowledgement of the unacceptability of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence coupled with greater awareness of the need to take action to address it.

A further area of focus has been the drive to combat the growing global problem of human trafficking. A range of measures have been adopted, including: (i) strengthening of the legislation and the public notification of an Action Plan on Trafficking in Children; (ii) increase of penalties for trafficking offences; (iii) extension of training to a wide variety of personnel in state organisations; (iv) undertaking a range of awareness measures.

The same commitment to combating gender-based violence is reflected in our international work. To help inform that work, we have established at national level a Joint Consortium on Gender-based violence, which brings together MSII Aid, humanitarian, human rights and development NGOs and the Defence Forces with the aim of sharing best practice and strengthening institutional response.

Building on this knowledge developed through the work of the Joint Consortium, we have developed partnerships across our bilateral and multilateral programmes to combat gender-based violence.

In Sierra Leone, for example, we helped fund civil society support centres; and in Uganda we support research on the impact of community-based prevention work.

Cross learning

None of our societies, in any region of the world, has attained full equality for women; all of us are on a journey, and we need to learn from and support each other as we make that journey.

In Ireland, for example, we have had a General Election in the past few days and it was disappointing that women candidates for election accounted for only 15% percent of candidates overall. We clearly have scope to learn from others what approaches have worked best in bringing about a higher level of women's engagement in politics.

In doing so, we can ourselves contribute to cross learning, we have been exploring the ways of doing so. In 2008, for example, I worked with Northern Ireland, Ulster, Leinster and Munster to develop a cross learning initiative on resolution 1325; we presented the findings of this exercise to USG Banchelet in October 2010.

One of CSW is the learning and sharing opportunities which it provides. During this session, Ireland has co-hosted two side events directly connected to the priority and review themes. At the first, we learned from young Israeli and Palestinian women how they are using technology to build tolerance. At the second, we heard from young Zambian girls of their hopes and dreams, and of the fundamental importance of education in helping to make those dreams realisable.

Conclusion

I would conclude with a reminder to my opening theme. All of us present at the CSW are privileged to be here and to have our own individuality in the past weeks. If it is to be the impact on the ground.

Some of the most inspiring women we met over the past weeks in North Africa and the Middle East – women who would describe themselves as ordinary, have shown us how extraordinary they are. We are inspired by the courage and unity with which they are fighting for the rights that the UN stands for. Our task is to keep reminding women to bridge the distance from New York to all those places where women are in urgent need of our affirmation and support.