

# Nations Unies

**Commission on the Status of Women**  
Fiftieth session  
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## PANEL I

**Enhanced participation of women in development: an enabling environment for achieving gender equality and the advancement of women, taking into account, inter alia, the field of education, health and work**

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At the international level, the United Nations must stay in the forefront and there is reason to discuss how the United Nations system can promote gender equality worldwide in a more effective way. In Norway, we are organizing a network for Women and the United Nations to help reinforce the role of the system. The under-representation of women, at senior level in particular, in the United Nations system as a whole is a reason for concern. Specialized agencies, programmes and funds also need to contribute more to the empowerment of women and gender equality across the whole range of their policies and programmes. In addition, special bodies dealing with women's issues should be strengthened. They should not be expected to take a main responsibility for gender mainstreaming, but have important roles giving women a more audible voice, increasing their influence and promoting their interests in development and peace efforts. The organization of large regional or thematic women's conferences should further be considered to bring issues forward, attract media coverage and hold Governments to account.

### **Women in political office**

I have been requested to focus my statement on women's employment and participation in decision-making.

Governments have a crucial role, not only improving the situation of women, but also creating conditions conducive for women's participation and equal voice in decision-making processes.

National politics have during the last half century been dominated by men all over the world. In this sense, it is amazing how similar the political institutions are in spite of historical, cultural and social differences from one country to the other. The Nordic countries have been in the lead, increasing the participation of women in political office. We have had the advantage of a relatively high level of socioeconomic development with extensive education and employment for women as well as relatively egalitarian social and cultural traditions. But an active women's movement combined with political institutions that did not present too serious obstacles to the inclusion of women, were key to the progress that has been achieved.

Socio-economic, cultural and political factors all influence the participation of women in political decision-making. Political rights and civil freedoms are basic. There must be qualified women who are motivated to engage in formal politics, and attitudes must be such that they – as well as men – are accepted as political actors. Finally, the political system must not be too adverse. It is a widespread experience that proportional electoral systems generally are more favourable for the representation of women than majority systems. In addition, special measures may facilitate the access of women.

In my own country, Norway, the introduction of quotas was crucial. They were controversial, but have been extremely effective in improving the gender balance in decision-making bodies. We started using quotas in the political parties in the 1970s, when there were around 15 per cent women in Parliament and local councils. Women both within and outside the political parties demanded more resolute support of women in politics. My own party began tentatively suggesting at least 25 per cent women among candidates for local councils,

adopted a 40 per cent quota in 1983, it was a breakthrough. Even parties to the right that were against quotas, felt pressured to increase the representation of women. It became an area of political competition. The share of women in political bodies increased rapidly, passing 30 per cent in Parliament and the local councils by the mid-1980s. But subsequently the representation has stagnated. Today, we have 38 per cent women in Parliament and 36 per cent in the local councils. Only the cabinet has passed the 40 percent milestone. The world got the first cabinet with a female Head of Government and 40 per cent female ministers in 1986, with Gro Harlem Brundtland as the Prime Minister. Since then the share of women in the Norwegian cabinet has never been below 40 percent, though the parties in power have changed. Today we have achieved a new record of 50/50 men and women.

Proud as we are of the composition of the Cabinet, we are discussing how to move forward to further increase the representation of women in other political bodies. Maybe we can benefit from experiences of others. Many developing countries have traditional political systems where women have powerful positions, and during recent years different kinds of quota provisions have been introduced, increasing the role of women in political office in a notable way. Countries such as Rwanda, Belgium, Costa Rica, Argentina, Guyana, Mozambique, South Africa and others have seen an amazingly fast development in the share of women in Parliament – challenging the traditional Nordic lead. This is most exciting and I hope they will share their experiences with us.

### **Participation at both executive and grass roots levels**

In spite of progress in some countries, the general picture of women's representation in political decision-making is not very encouraging. The increase of women in Parliament and ministerial posts has been steady, but uneven and very slow. Totally, there still are around six times as many men as women in these important positions. In 2005, only 20 Parliaments and 17 cabinets have reached the target of 30 per cent women. This has been considered a "critical mass" to bring about change. However, recent research questions this assumption. Important as it is to increase the share of women, a certain number does not automatically make the institutional culture, policies and priorities more women-friendly. Processes of change depend on the local conditions: the political system, the institution and the actors – women as well as men – both within and outside of the formal political institutions.

The number of women Heads of State or Government around the world has increased markedly during recent years. Though they are relatively few in numbers, national female leaders have become a global phenomenon. In fact, 50 countries – or one fourth of the independent nation states – have had one or more female top leaders during the last half-century. From 1945 to 1989, there were a total of 20 female Presidents and Prime Ministers, but the number more than doubled during the following years. From 1990 to 2006, 50 women got a top position at the national level. Their access to power is important. They provide new role models, and though they might be controversial as women and as leaders, they prove that women are capable of being national executives. But our expectations with regards to what they can achieve, particularly with regards to women's interests, must be realistic. In many cases, the female national leaders did not obtain the most important executive position in their country, and they often exercised their functions only for a short period of time. Their possibilities for bringing about women-friendly changes were further limited by the fact that they usually were more or less alone as women in very male dominated political hierarchies. They were elected or appointed first of all to implement



Otherwise, they risk sanctions such as enforced liquidation. It is very exciting to see what will happen now.

The use of quotas is an example of affirmative action to promote gender equality. But such measures are not always accepted. Norway encountered problems with the European Free Trade Association when it was decided to earmark positions for female University professors to improve the gender balance. Only 16 percent of the professors were women. But EFTA went against, emphasising that the measure entailed a distortion of the competition for the posts. We are struggling to find other ways of promoting gender balance. It is clear, however, that you cannot in many cases improve the status of women and benefit from their competence without changing rules of the game that traditionally have favoured men and often still do. Other ways of proceeding must be introduced, often in the form of affirmative action.

### **Poor working women**

The working conditions of women worldwide have been altered partly dramatically during recent decades and will be further altered in the future due to changes in the international economic operations and environmental conditions. It is extremely urgent to improve the management of the global economy and the environment, and the United Nations must play a key role. The challenge is to increase the knowledge and understanding of the global economy, analyse ways of promoting better and fairer management and introduce global rules to guide or regulate priorities and action of international economic institutions. Particular emphasis should be on measures to prevent or reduce negative repercussions of globalization and liberalization on poor countries and poor people; reducing disparities and improving living standards, closing gender income gaps and ensuring safe and healthy working conditions for all. Increased emphasis and additional efforts are also required to make production and consumption environmentally sustainable in both industrialized and developing countries. It is of particular urgency to halt or reduce the climate change, the deterioration of soil and water and the depletion of fisheries, forests and biodiversity. These developments threaten the global environment, but the negative consequences will hit poor and exposed populations, not least women, the hardest. It is not possible to enter into details here. Suffice it to emphasize the importance of including women's concerns in policies and programmes. Otherwise the environment for gender equality may become less enabling and the situation for vulnerable women more critical.

Though the Secretary-General's report on an enabling environment (E/CN.6/2006/12) deals briefly with poor working women, the recommendations relating to work, constructive as they are, lack a focus on poor working women. Globalization has brought new opportunities for well-educated workers, but has deepened insecurity and poverty for others, including women, who lack the skills to compete or the means to acquire them. Instead of informal work becoming formalised, work is moving from formal to informal, regulated to unregulated, and workers are losing job security, medical and other benefits. A growing share of the workforce in both developed and developing countries is not covered by employment-based social and legal protection. Women workers are not only concentrated in the informal economy, they are in the more precarious forms of informal employment, where earnings are the most unreliable and the most meagre. This has consequences not only for their own health and well-being, but also that of their families. Many children, not least girls, are forced to work, often under precarious conditions, to help the family earn a living.

Most of the poor women live in rural areas, often engaged in subsistence agriculture. In many poor countries agriculture has a dominating position, but development of the sector in general and of women farmers in particular has been neglected to a large extent. Comprehensive measures are required in many cases to improve the macroeconomic conditions for agriculture, the accessibility to markets, the technology, methods of production and quality of products as well as the protection of the environment. Special attention must be given to women cultivating under difficult circumstances with limited access to resources. Both in rural, peri-urban and urban areas women are engaged in micro and small-scale enterprises to earn an income, but conditions are often unfavourable. The women have unequal access to productive resources and services, including finance and skill upgrading. Some legal provisions make it difficult for women to take initiatives for business development and their reproductive roles put them in a disadvantaged position. The United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) has proposed a “bottom-up growth strategy” to encourage the activities of women entrepreneurs.

The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) has just published a special report on “Women, work and poverty” demanding a favourable policy environment and specific interventions in order to increase economic opportunities, social protection and a representative voice for the poor, especially women, in the informal economy. Besides the transformation of basic structures that perpetuate gender equality, the report recommends that the organizing of informal women workers should be supported, along with unions and member-based worker’s organizations, to obtain labour rights, legal and social protection. Gender-sensitive, disaggregated statistics on national labour forces must be elaborated as a basis for appropriate policies in support of informal workers and g MDGs)D -0.021 4.5 0 TD 0 13transforma





