

On Tuesday, February 22, 2011, the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) commenced in the General Assembly Hall of the United Nations Headquarters, New York. Delegates from member states and many women from civil society organizations (CSOs) were in attendance, filling the Assembly Hall. Global Action to Prevent War focuses on women, peace and security, and was pleased to monitor the proceedings of the opening session. This is the first session of CSW to be held after the establishment of United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (UN Women), and was thus described as a “moment of tremendous expectations, excitement and promise” by Garen Nazarian, Chair of CSW.

The theme for the fifty-fifth session of CSW is “to promote women’s and girls’ access to education, training, science and technology.” The Deputy Secretary General of the U.N., Dr. Asha-Rose Migiro, addressed the commission by commending this emphasis, and underscored the role of education as a key driver for economic growth and its function as a catalyst for empowering women. She acknowledged significant challenges in the continued underrepresentation of girls in science and technology, and the pressing challenge of correcting the gap in proper knowledge and skills as women enter the workforce. The Under Secretary urged the commission to shine a spotlight on discrimination and violence, and offered encouragement in making commitments towards achieving gender equality, for it is central to achieving common goals for development, human rights and peace and security.

Lazarous Kapambwe, President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) made a firm commitment to align duties of the ECOSOC with UN Women and other development agencies. He further highlighted the need for member states to initiate sufficient political will to live up to the expectations in meeting commitments made in the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action. The president echoed the Under Secretary General by further emphasizing the role of education as a “positive force multiplier” for families and the development of their communities and nations. However, he expressed concern of the impact of the current economic downturn in exacerbating existing inequalities, slowing down progress of women’s empowerment, and the mounting challenges in women’s transition into the labor market. The president thus expressed his sincere hope that the commission will provide the necessary action to grant strategic direction and consider lessons learned to overcome these obstacles. Kapambwe closed his statement with his encouraging reading of an old Chinese proverb. “To plan for a day, catch a fish. To plan for a year, plant some rice. To plan for a decade, plan a tree. But to plan for a lifetime, teach a girl.” Indeed, he said, “No country can fully develop in a sustainable way without the full participation of women in all aspects of life.” This garnered much applause from the hall and injected a tone of optimism for the commission.

This sense of optimism was further established by the statement from the Executive Director of UN Women, Ms. Michelle Bachelet. The Executive Director expressed her encouragement of the representatives from several countries in their progress in greater inclusion of women into leadership positions at the national and local levels, achieving parity in primary education, and the passage of new domestic laws to penalize domestic violence and eliminate discrimination into the labor market. Ms. Bachelet characterized the commission as a forum for member states to share ideas of what works in the field and how to contribute effectively towards concrete changes in the

daily lives of women. Despite these steps of progress, Ms. Bachelet recognized the fragility and current inadequacy of current gains in the mission to achieve gender equality. These points of concern include the human trafficking industry and cuts in basic services in the midst of fiscal austerity measures. The Executive Director urged members of the commission to guard against postponing efforts to alleviate these problems until there is greater stabilization from the financial crisis. Rather, women can and must be the solution to problems of economic development, peace and security, and the realization of human rights. Ms. Bachelet also expressed a need to learn more about how the ways natural disasters, conflict displacement, and the challenges women face in decision making obstruct the realization of untapped potential. She stated the need for frank analysis of the challenges in country specific contexts and the need for UN women to work at the national, regional, and local levels to meet these challenges.

Ms. Bachelet then moved to present her operational framework for achieving gender equality. The Executive Director outlined five thematic practices: expand women's voice, leadership and participation; ending violence against women through the establishment of mechanisms needed to enforce laws; strength implementation of women peace and security agenda; enhance women's economic empowerment in the context global financial downturn; and making gender equality a priority at the national, local, and sector level in planning and budgeting.

Bachelet also outlined five key findings from analysis of member states. First, access to education is not sufficient in and of itself. It is crucial to improve the quality and relevance of education. Secondly, gender stereotypes are a root cause of operational segregation. Bachelet expressed the need for systemic change at this level, including sensitizing teachers and providing proper role models for girls and boys. Third, there must be equal access to labor market opportunities and ease of transition from school to work. Fourth, scientific research should be gender sensitive and research driven. Finally, women's potential is largely unrealized. There needs to be a greater priority to encourage women in affecting science and technology fields. Bachelet ended her statement by reminding delegates that commitments at CSW and UN Women are only the first step. Member states must follow through in their commitments for gender equality at the national level, and she articulated that UN Women will serve as a dependent ally in this realizing this endeavor.

Various agencies, including the Group of 77 and China, ASEAN, along with delegations from member states, joined in recognizing the need for perception of gender and development as linked towards progress of the Millennium Development Goals. The Vice Chair of the of Group of 77 and China put special emphasis on the plight of women under foreign occupation along with the current and emerging world food insecurity and the impact of climate change upon impoverished women. The representative of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) stressed the importance of lifelong learning as a means towards gender equality. An important component of this priority is an emphasis in establishing compulsory primary education regardless of class, ethnicity, or religion. The representative of the European Union agreed in this emphasis of a lifecycle perspective as there are cumulative effects on the education of gender roles, leading to consequences for women's engagement in society in later life. The opening session concluded with concurring statements from member states who agreed in

providing a greater emphasis in assisting women in the transition from schooling into labor markets.

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*The fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women will take place at United Nations Headquarters in New York from Tuesday, 22 February to Friday, 4 March 2011.*