

Third Committee
Section on the Advancement of Women
Monday October 10-Wed October 12, 2011

Highlights of the Third Committee Discussion

Support for UN Women and the Committee on the Elimination on the Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), empowerment of rural women, and the participation of women in political and peace processes were among the common themes addressed at the Third Committee session on the Advancement of Women during the week of 10 October 2011. The session opened with three presentations, one from UN Women, one from the Office of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, and one from CEDAW, followed by general discussion.

Assistant Secretary-General for **UN Women, Lakshmi Puri** noted UN Women's commitment to address gaps that prevent women from enjoying legal rights, obstacles to their empowerment and their security. She noted there has been some progress on gender equality evidenced by the promotion of women as agents of change. She also commented that democracy cannot be achieved if half of the population fails to enjoy full participation in public life and access to political rights. Furthermore, she highlighted the role of women in the Arab Spring and their involvement in shaping political liberty. Along with emphasizing the need for intergovernmental development, gender equality and empowerment, the promotion of women's policy participation must be realized at UN meetings and at during other opportunities such as Rio+20. Ms. Puri also emphasized the role of rural women and commented on the need to strengthen their empowerment through gender-specific measures at the national level that directly address their needs.

Next to take the floor was **Rashida Manjou, Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women**, who noted the need for state parties to address the causes of violence against women and states' responsibilities under international human rights law to investigate, punish, protect from, and prevent such crimes. She proposed a four-step, holistic approach to tackling women's discrimination and violence: 1) while human rights are universal and indivisible, states need to adopt specific measures that address violence against women; 2) states should address violence against women at all levels, from the private to the systemic; 3) states should be more sensitive to inequalities and discrimination and the effect they have on levels of violence; and 4) states should understand and take into account gender differences.

As the final presenter, **Silvia Pimentel, Chairperson of CEDAW**, stressed the need for collaboration and gender equality as well as the need to prioritize women's rights in part by giving women a broader voice in society. She also noted that not enough has been done at national levels on women's participation given the limited access to rights and services for women, nor has there been any real commitment by many state parties to make needed improvements. Finally, she mentioned the need for a more nuanced understanding among state parties regarding CEDAW expectations in this area in order to ensure more effective implementation of existing resolutions and laws.

In opening the General Discussion, the **Group of 77 and China** emphasized the need to increase women's participation in decision making processes, especially when trying to achieve development and peace, while the **African Group** discussed strides made by the African community on this issue, such as the African 'women's ticket' in Nairobi. The Africa Group also focused on rural women and their empowerment, accessibility and participation.

In addition to discussing the unique needs of rural women, **CARICOM** stressed the need to acknowledge women as equal participants in society; noted that men continue to dominate in all areas of society even though women are pursuing higher education opportunities; and stressed that gender-violence is a matter that requires more immediate attention. The **Southern African Development Community (SADC)** stressed accountability, ending gender-based violence, the need for gender equality and support for African women. Interestingly, SADC noted the gaps between state commitments undertaken and the implementation of rules and policies, and the contradictions that exist between international responsibilities and customary law.

ASEAN highlighted its own achievements including regional workshops and seminars with government officials and meetings with civil society. The **Rio Group** noted that no true progress can be made without addressing gender differences; thus, they encouraged national gender mechanisms focusing on empowering women, and incorporating all societal sectors, from NGOS, to academia and to research institutions. The Group also called on member states to more carefully track state progress on these issues, noting both advances and persistent challenges. Finally, the **Arab Group** noted that women's participation is essential to the success of development strategies and underscored that their region has taken steps to advance integration of women into society, protect their rights to citizenship, and support programs that are geared towards eliminating violence against women and rehabilitating victims.

The government of **Liechtenstein** noted that more needs to be done among state parties to protect women's participation during political transitions and to emphasize the gender dimensions of conflict resolution. The Liechtenstein delegation addressed the need to include women as mediators, in particular in the mediator training programs sponsored by UN Women and supported the MARA, and highlighted the persistence of impunity for violations against women. The **United States** turned its attention to national laws and the need to repeal any discriminatory laws that can contribute to conditions of statelessness.

While **Thailand** mentioned that women's participation is strengthened by tailored-made national plans that incorporate particular needs and perspectives, **China** affirmed the need to provide for the social development of women as a mean of empowerment. **Norway** mentioned the World Bank Development Report citing, "*[g]ender equality [is] smart economics*, but it also empowers women as economical, political, and social actors and leads to *more representative decision making*" and stressed that "[g]ender equality cannot be treated merely as a side-event, a side-activity or an extra program-neither in a UN context, nor in a the member-states."

Egypt encouraged member states to promote full participation of women and outlined its own priorities for achieving this goal, including "[s]ensitizing the society...on the effects of gender-based discrimination

therefore discouraging and eliminating negative practices, stereotypes, and traditional perceptions about women's capacities..." **Switzerland** referenced the role of women as agents of change in conflict and post-conflict situations, such agency requiring both increased access and increased security. **Japan** explicitly supported women's participation in conflict prevention, resolution and peace-building.

Libya assured other delegates that the TNC will allow women's economic and political participation and will highlight the protection of women's rights. **Palestine** reported that the conditions for women have worsened because violence has increased both armed conflict and domestic violence.

In addition, the **Republic of Korea** stressed that crimes of sexual violence against women, via systematic rape and sexual slavery, can amount to war crimes and even crimes against humanity. This delegation encouraged member states to "make the utmost efforts to end such crimes, not only taking all measures to protect women and girls in armed conflict, but also providing effective measures and reparations for victims and also ending impunity, by bringing the offer to justice." **Ghana** noted that women's low levels of participation in some countries "excludes their perspectives from policies and legislation, and deprives society of their contribution to national budgets and resource allocation," which, in turn, makes it harder to meet the MDGs.

Trinidad and Tobago highlighted a First Committee resolution on "Women, Disarmament, Nonproliferation and Arms control," and announced new plans to increase women's participation. A joint statement by **Canada, New Zealand, and Australia** noted the need to ensure women's rights in conflict and peacebuilding and asked member states "to commit to concrete, time-bound and measureable actions to ensure the aims of Resolution 1325 are realized."

Finally, **Finland** recognized the profound role of women in the Arab Spring and promoted increases in women's participation in conflict prevention, negotiations and mediation, and peacekeeping, peacebuilding and reconstruction. The **Turkish delegation** noted steps its government has taken towards the advancement of women including giving supremacy to CEDAW resolutions over domestic laws and fulfilling its responsibilities under the Beijing Platform.

Overall, gender equality, empowerment of women, and emphasis on rural women were among the common themes of this year's discussion. There was also a welcome but still limited focus on women as agents of change via their participation in conflict resolution, peacekeeping and other peace processes.

Note: This is intended as only a short summary of the highlights of the three-day session. If anyone wants the statements, I have a significant amount of them, along with the Special Rapporteur's statement.