

Informal debate of the General Assembly

Promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women

6 – 8 March 2007

I. Introduction

The President of the General Assembly invited Member States and observers to an informal thematic debate of the General Assembly on the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. The debate took place on 6, 7 and 8 March 2007. The debate provided an opportunity to share views on actions, best practices and lessons learned in the promotion of gender equality; to discuss how to bridge the gaps between policy and practice; and, to renew political commitments towards full implementation of existing agreements. The thematic debate consisted of a high-level debate and two interactive panel discussions.

The informal debate built on existing commitments on gender equality from the United Nations Charter to the Beijing Platform for Action and to the recognition by the World Summit in 2005 that gender equality and human rights are essential to advance development, peace and security (A/RES/60/1, para 12).

The informal debate was opened by the President of the General Assembly who noted that gender equality was not only the responsibility of women, but the responsibility of all, women as well as men. The Secretary-General made a statement in which he noted that gender equality and empowering women was a condition for building healthier, better educated, more peaceful and more prosperous societies. There were more than 80 speakers in the debate, including 20 Ministers.

The first interactive panel discussion focused on the role of women in decision-making at all levels and the second panel on the economic empowerment of women, including through micro-finance. Each panel event included contributions from panelists and an interactive exchange of views with Member States and representatives of non-governmental organizations.

The event was closed by the President of the General Assembly who called on participants to move from mere words to a speedy delivery on the promises made to accelerate the achievement of gender equality.

II. Key findings

A number of key findings and common concerns emerged from the informal debate:

1. There is a broad consensus that gender equality is a goal in its own right and is essential for communities and States to enjoy political stability and sustainable development;
2. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Millennium Development Goals together with other international and regional commitments are widely recognized as the guiding principles for the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women;

3. Women have made some progress in their representation in parliament, at the cabinet level, in the judiciary and in the private sector, sometimes due to quota systems and other measures, but women continue to be under-represented, lack of sufficient influence and power over decision-making processes and their outcomes, including resource allocations in all sectors;
4. The economic empowerment of women is critical to the achievement of gender equality. While micro-credit and micro-finance schemes constitute one poverty alleviation strategy, the impact of globalization and macro-economic policies require new initiatives to ensure and strengthen women's access to decent work, markets and resources;
5. A broad set of measures are being taken across all regions to combat violence against women and girls, but there is also wide recognition that gender-based violence continues to be a major impediment to women's and girls' empowerment and to the development of communities and States;
6. Many strategies are available to address cross-cutting gender issues in all sectors, including through national mechanisms and institutions on gender equality; national gender equality policies and action plans; sector-specific laws and administrative measures; and gender-budgeting initiatives;
7. The empowerment of women depends on the implementation of inter-connected and multi-dimensional strategies in areas such as education, health care, economic and political participation and decision-making;
8. Women's participation and leadership in conflict prevention, peace processes and conflict resolution as well as in peacekeeping operations is key to progress toward peace and security, including the full implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security;
9. Obstacles to gender equality and the empowerment of women remain in the forms of patriarchal structures and norms; socialization processes based on rigid gender roles; discriminatory laws and practices; lack of access to education, health care, economic and other resources; inadequate sex-disaggregated data; and insufficient financial resources;
10. The achievement of gender equality requires collective commitments by individuals, communities and Member States to change deep-seated stereotypical attitudes and expectations toward gender roles;
11. More involvement by men and boys, and increased awareness among them about gender equality issues, are necessary to achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women;
12. Regional and international partnerships and cooperation between governments, bilateral and multi-lateral institutions, civil society and the private sector are effective tools for collecting and sharing expertise, information, good practices and lessons learned to empower women;
13. The role of the United Nations system in improving the political, economic and social status of women was clearly recognized, while at the same time the recommendations of the High-level Panel on System-wide Coherence for a stronger, well-resourced and more accountable gender entity with a focus on tangible results at the country level was widely supported.

III. General debate

A number of recurrent themes and concerns emerged during the general debate, which was based on the common understanding that women's enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms throughout the life cycle improved not only their own and their families' well-being, but also the political stability, peace and sustainable development of entire communities and countries.

1. International commitments

Many Member States noted that their efforts to promote gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment was guided by the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and other international and regional human rights instruments. A number of Member States also referred to their commitment to implement Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security. Member States reiterated that progress for women was progress for the of whole society, and that gender equality and the empowerment of women were essential to achieving international development objectives, including the Millennium Development Goals.

2. National implementation

While Member States recognized the persistent gap between *de jure* and *de facto* gender equality, many speakers referred to multiple gender equality initiatives at national level in areas such as decision-making, education, health, employment, microfinance, and poverty eradication, including through institutional mechanisms such as ministries on gender equality and inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms, gender equality action plans, constitutional and legal reforms, mechanisms to assess the gender impact of new policies and laws, the collection of sex-disaggregated data and gender-sensitive budgetary processes.

A number of Member States recognized the important partnerships with, and the role of non-governmental organizations and the private sector to empower women and achieve gender equality.

3. Empowerment of women

Several Member States recognized the linkage between women's political and economic decision-making. With support of measures, including quotas and targets, there has been some increase in the number of women in parliaments and governments at national and local levels and in public administration, including women heading national banks and holding positions at all levels of the judiciary; and women managers in private companies. However, most Member States noted that much more progress needed to be made so that women could fully participate in the shaping of agendas and decision-making processes in all sectors.

As the same time, Member States noted inequalities in women's access to employment, credit and technology, the vertical and horizontal segregation in the workforce, the over-representation of women among the unskilled workers, the unemployed and in the informal sector. They

pointed to the role of information and communication technologies to enhance the participation of women in the labour market and the need to provide skills and leadership training to women.

Microfinance initiatives were seen as a key tool to women's economic empowerment, in combination with support systems, training programmes and the removal of discriminatory laws and practices, such as access and control of land and other resources. Member States also referred to the need to take comprehensive measures in macro-economic, financial and social policies to ensure gender sensitive impacts.

A number of Member States highlighted the necessity to create conditions for women and men to be able to enjoy a better balance between their contributions to the labor force, and domestic and caring responsibilities..

4. Violence against women

Many Member States identified violence against women and girls, including trafficking, as a priority area and a major impediment to achieving gender equality, including women's participation in the economy and political decision-making. A variety of measures were being taken in all regions, including the promulgation of specific laws on violence against women, including domestic violence acts, the provision of support services, targeted data collection, training of law enforcement personnel and budgetary allocations. Some Member States welcomed the recent studies of the Secretary-General on violence against women and against children, noting that both studies called for a multi-dimensional approach.

5. Peace and security

Several Member States noted the link between peace and security and the empowerment of women, and reiterated the need for the full participation of women in conflict prevention, peace negotiations and peacebuilding processes. A few Member States reported on their efforts to develop national action plans on the full implementation of Security Council resolution 1325. In some countries, barriers to women's participation in the armed forces are being removed and efforts are made to increase the number of women in peacekeeping operations.

6. Challenges to gender equality and the empowerment of women

Member States recognized challenges to achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women, including poverty, the pandemic of violence against women and girls, HIV/AIDS, unequal access to education, patriarchal norms of institutions, the low number of women role models, inadequate sex-disaggregated data, lack of methodologies to measure and monitor progress, and inadequate financial and human resources.

7. Role of men and boys

Several Member States highlighted the lack of awareness on gender equality issues among men and boys, and stressed the importance of their involvement in addressing male privilege and achieving gender equality and empowerment of women.

8. Stereotypes, cultural and traditional practices

Several Member States were carrying out awareness raising and educational activities to change negative stereotypes and address harmful cultural practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting, widowhood-related rituals, early marriage, and son preference. The role of religion in the empowerment of women was noted with a caution against the misinterpretation of religious texts.

9. International cooperation

Some Member States noted the beneficial role of international cooperation for gender equality and the empowerment of women, including through collection and exchange of good practices and experiences, and access to knowledge and technology.

Some Member States referred to their bilateral and multilateral initiatives to support the empowerment of women and gender equality, including through mainstreaming gender perspectives in their development programmes.

IV. Interactive panels

1. Women in decision-making

a. Gaining access: numbers of women in leadership positions count

International commitments underline the right of women to participate in decision-making processes, but gaining access to institutions still remains the first challenge for women. In some countries, women had made some significant inroads in political participation, but the global average of women's representation in national parliaments remained low at 17 per cent (as of 31 January 2007). While acknowledging that the number of women in decision-making positions in political and other spheres is not a sufficient indicator of women's empowerment, participants also noted that women's influence increases with their growing and sustained representation in political leadership functions. Women in government, parliament, the judiciary and other institutions serve as role models and thus as pull factors for other women. Strategies to increase women's participation in political parties and parliaments such as quota systems, training, networking, capacity-building and resource allocations are well known, but must be better utilized to accelerate the pace of change.

b. Making a difference: the quality of women's decision-making

In addition to quantitative aspects, the quality and outcomes of women's decision-making was addressed. Women are often expected to exercise power differently, but their numeric representation does not always lead to substantively different participation from men. It was acknowledged that the impact of women's participation and leadership in public and private institutions, as well as their achievement of gender equality goals, can be limited by patriarchal institutional norms and underlying informal power structures.

c. Transforming leadership

Women may exercise power differently, but insufficient data is available on the experiences and the impact of women in positions of power. The participants discussed the need for new concepts of power and leadership and pointed to the potential for gender equality advocates to transform institutions and the ways they function.

d. Challenges

Speakers identified a number of challenges. Existing patriarchal values and corruption in political parties are major obstacles to increasing women's decision-making in the public sphere. Governments and international organizations (including the World Bank, WTO, EU and AU) need to be held accountable for their compliance with international commitments to gender equality and human rights.

Concerted steps need to be taken to ensure that new generations of young women leaders gain access to decision-making arenas. Violence against women continues to be a major impediment to women's full participation in public and private institutions.

2. Economic empowerment, including microcredit

a. Micro-finance for women's empowerment

Participants emphasized that poverty and lack of access to education, health services, property rights and credit were obstacles to the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women; and noted that microfinance provided innovative ways of overcoming these obstacles. The positive impact of microfinance on the lives of women and their families included economic empowerment, disruption of intergenerational transmission of poverty, encouragement of poor women to start their own micro-enterprises, and enhancement of women's decision-making power in the home and the community at large.

However, participants emphasized that an enabling environment - with supportive legislation and policies: including, inheritance and property rights, credit and employment; investments in infrastructure; gender sensitive budgets and macro-economic policies; access to markets, - was required to ensure the full potential of microfinance on women's empowerment. Supportive measures for microfinance included alternative collateral mechanisms, capacity-building of women entrepreneurs in areas such as identification of markets and management of enterprises; provision of health services and education programmes. It was also recognized that micro-finance schemes would not provide livelihoods to all women and that policies also needed to address the need to create decent work opportunities for non-entrepreneurs.

Another crucial step was to bridge the gap between microfinance and the formal banking system to assist women entrepreneurs in graduating from micro-entrepreneurship in the informal sector to management of small and medium-size enterprises in the formal sector.

b. Innovation at the macro-economic level

Since the efficiency and viability of microfinance programmes is not guaranteed, especially on a large scale for women in precarious situations, participants emphasized the crucial role of governments in incorporating gender perspectives into macro-finance, i.e. fiscal and monetary

policies. Gender-sensitive policies would not only assist women entrepreneurs in accessing markets and obtaining reasonable interest rates for loans, but also promote decent employment opportunities, fair taxation, and investments in infrastructure. However, the current macroeconomic and fiscal position in many countries, developed and developing, had put pressures on public spending with negative consequences for women's health, education and formal and informal employment opportunities.

An innovative approach had been used in India to establish both a Micro-credit Regulation Bill and an Employment Guarantee Scheme for women and men who lacked other viable income generating alternatives. Funds released through the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative in Ghana had enabled the government to allocate resources towards education, health, water and sanitation, empowerment of women, and the establishment of a women's development fund.

Participants highlighted the need to strengthen the integration of gender perspectives in the implementation of the aid effectiveness agenda by ensuring that the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness included gender equality tools and methodologies. It was also critical that international economic and financial policy processes was aligned with international commitments on gender equality, such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

c. Accountability on gender equality through gender-responsive budgeting

Participants stressed that gender-responsive budget initiatives were important tools for creating transparency, inclusiveness and fairness in public taxation and public expenditures and achieving gender equality outcomes. Efforts had been made in some countries to ensure participation of civil society, including women's organizations, in the budget decision-making and impact evaluation processes. Since budgets were often presented in a very technical manner, initiatives had been taken to make them more understandable to parliamentarians, civil society and the general public, including through practical guides and handbooks. Training on gender-budgeting had been carried out for governments at both national and local levels. In addition, performance indicators and gender statistics, including on women's participation, had been developed and reported to parliaments to ensure effective monitoring of the budget process and its impact on women. More efforts were needed to develop a culture of gender analysis in budgets, resources allocation frameworks and public sector performance indicators.

Participants called on UN support with regard to macro and microfinance initiatives. This included sharing experiences on gender sensitive budgeting and macroeconomic policy; evaluating the impact of microfinance schemes on women's empowerment; supporting women and women's NGOs in gender sensitive budget processes; and providing high level expertise and assistance for the integration of gender perspectives in international and national economic policy.

V. The United Nations gender architecture

Many speakers recognized the role of the United Nations in the promotion of gender equality and acknowledged the support received at the national level from United Nations entities, including

UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNIFEM, INSTRAW, and the gender units of the regional commissions.

At the same time, Member States expressed strong support for a more coherent, better coordinated and better resourced United Nations gender architecture with both normative and operational functions, which would strengthen the impact of gender equality and the empowerment of women programmes at the country level and across the Funds, Programmes, Agencies and Department of the United Nations. Member States also pointed out that each United Nations entity was responsible for mainstreaming gender perspectives in its policies and programmes, and called for much better accountability mechanisms to ensure proper implementation.

Some speakers called for an intergovernmental processes to discuss the recommendations in the report of the High-level Panel on System-wide Coherence.