



SRI LANKA

Statement

by

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STATEMENTS

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by

THE HONORABLE T. E. RYAN

Assistant Secretary, Division of Investigation of the United States
Department of Justice

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Washington, New York
24th March 1950

Mr. Chairman,
Hon. Ministers & distinguished delegates

This year marks the 15th Anniversary of the Beijing World Conference on Women. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action announced to the world the strategic goals and actions that should be undertaken to overcome obstacles to the promotion of women's rights. I would, therefore, like to at the outset reiterate Sri Lanka's commitment to the full implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action as well as to the Outcome Document of the 23rd Special Session of the UNGA. These documents provide the foundation for achieving gender equality in the world as well as the Millennium Development Goals.

Sri Lanka supports the consolidation of the 4 UN gender entities into a single strengthened UN Gender Machinery. We believe that this will go a long way in strengthening the UN systems' work on gender equality and the empowerment of women at the national and international levels. We call for the speedy conclusion of the intergovernmental negotiations on the other outstanding areas of the system wide coherence.

Mr. Chairman,

Sri Lanka's Constitution guarantees equal rights without discrimination on grounds of sex and provides for affirmative action to ensure equal rights. Sri Lanka takes great pride in the fact that we adopted a "WOMEN'S CHARTER" way back in 1993 to give local expression to the goals envisaged in the CEDAW to which Sri Lanka is a party and as a measure to provide greater policy coherence on women's issues. We take equal pride that this Charter has been accepted as the cornerstone of all policy decisions on women by successive governments since then. With a view to implementing the Charter we have adopted a National Plan of Action on Women with the collaborative effort of the Government and NGOs. We have established the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Empowerment which is the national machinery and focal point in relation to achieving gender equity and equality.

Mr. Chairman,

Despite a decline in female unemployment, (52.1% of those employed are females and 47.9% are males) 7.4% of our women still live below the poverty line. (The national unemployment level has dropped to 13.2%). This is a major challenge and our Government has focused on the economic empowerment of women. There has been considerable government and donor funding for self-employment programmes through training, skills development, marketing assistance and micro credit schemes. Statistics show that 32% of our women are employed in the informal sector of our economy as unpaid family workers in agriculture and as small vendors whereas 40% are employed in the formal sector. On the other hand, the percentage of women entering universities in our country has increased

to 54.3%, this augers well for the future. 50.2% of our school going population consists of girls. We believe education is a key factor that would contribute to the economic empowerment of women. In this context, Sri Lanka is proud to record that it has nearly reached the second MDG goal of universal primary education with 96% of our boys and girls having enrolled in primary school. In urban areas, many women are higher wage earners than their male spouses. Our Government continues to focus on creating employment opportunities for women in their villages and this has effectively halted the drift towards the cities and the disruption of family life. With the opening up of foreign employment opportunities many women in our society play a constructive role in improving the economic conditions of their families by working abroad. Today 48% of our overseas workers comprise women. Measures have also been taken to protect the rights of our migrant workers by entering into agreements with the labour receiving countries.

There is no gender discrimination in Sri Lanka's health sector. We have, for several decades now, had a free public health service accessible to all. As a consequence, maternal and child health facilities are available throughout the country and health indicators for women are, therefore, very positive. The maternal mortality ratio is 32 per 100,000, the lowest in South Asia, whilst the child mortality rate under the age of 5 has declined to 10.2% per thousand live births. The average life expectancy of women in Sri Lanka is 76 years. New Regulations have been introduced enhancing maternity leave entitlements. The spread of HIV and AIDS has also been very low among women, a national STD/AIDS control programme has been operationalized and we are well ahead in achieving the MDG target of halting and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS. We can also proudly state that we have achieved the second MDG goal of improving maternal healthcare to internationally accepted standards.

Mr. Chairman,

Another priority for Sri Lanka has been encouraging women to be more actively involved in leadership roles. There are no constraints for Sri Lankan women to reach the heights of political power. As a matter of fact, the world's first elected woman Prime Minister came from Sri Lanka and we elected a female Executive Head of State 16 years ago. However, as a percentage only 5% of our Members of Parliament are women and only 3% of the members of our local authorities are women. The reasons for low participation are complex including socio cultural norms in some communities. Our national machinery with the support of the NGOs has launched several programmes to increase women's participation in politics and our Government is making a conscious effort to give increased representation to women. However, in the higher echelons of the public service and in the professional categories in the private sector our women are increasingly playing a key role.

In pursuance of the goal of preventing violence against women, our Government has adopted domestic legislation including a Prevention of Domestic Violence Act. We have opened counseling centres to assist women who need psychosocial support and shelters to house abused women and young girls when protection orders are given. Unfortunately sexual harassment is another form of violence which is on the increase in our country. The Ministry of Women's Empowerment with the support of the National Human Rights Commission has taken initiatives to form "Sexual Harassment Investigating Committees" in all Government institutions and to hold review meetings with the Committee members, the private sector has been encouraged to initiate similar measures. The Legal Aide Commission provides legal assistance to victims of violence for the conduct of legal proceedings. Many women in our country as yet lack awareness on how to approach a Court of Law. Therefore, our Ministry of Constitutional Affairs has formulated a programme to create awareness on judicial development relating to the new concept of public interest litigation.

Mr. Chairman,

When we reflect on the Beijing Platform for Action and where we are today, we take pride in what we have achieved for women's advancement and empowerment.

It is the hope of my delegation in assessing our progress and confronting the obstacles and challenges to the realization that we set out to achieve 15 years ago in Beijing, that we will effectively devise a more strategic approach with policy initiatives to ensure gender equality and equity for all deprived and oppressed women and girls throughout the world.

Thank you Mr. Chairman

