

U.S. Statement to the General Assembly Third Committee

Agenda Item 28(a)(b): Advancement of Women

Monday, October 10, 2011

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We are pleased that the Third Committee is devoting its attention to this important agenda item on the advancement of women, and we thank Executive Director Bachelet for her informative and insightful report. We send heartfelt congratulations to Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Yemeni activist Tawakkul Karman, and Liberian peace activist Leymah Roberta Gbowee for the prestigious honor of sharing this year's Nobel Peace Prize. As Secretary Clinton said last week, "They are shining examples of the difference that women can make and the progress they can help achieve when given the opportunity to make decisions about the future of their societies and countries." We also express our sadness at the recent passing of Professor Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize, and we celebrate her life and accomplishments.

The United States has made the empowerment of women and girls a guiding principle both at home and abroad, and we continue to incorporate women's empowerment into all aspects of our foreign policy and international development assistance. Today I would like to focus on two areas in which women's empowerment has become increasingly critical: the need to ensure women's full political participation, especially during times of transition; and the issue of women's equal right to nationality.

While we celebrate the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize winners and their achievements, we need to remember that across the globe, women's voices in political decision-making are still muted. Discriminatory laws and practices persist. If women cannot be equal partners in the political process, especially in times of transformation, nothing less than the development, economic prosperity, and stability of their nations is put at risk.

Recently, in the Middle East and North Africa, women often risked their lives to lead street protests and call for an end to repression. But after pressing for democracy, some of the same women now face exclusion from key political negotiations.

In this context, we commend the UN's work to highlight the costs of excluding women from the political process. UN Women did just this in the high-level event on "Women's Political Participation" that it hosted on the margins of the General Assembly's general debate last month. At that successful event, Secretary of State Clinton, alongside leaders from UN Women, UNDP, and a diverse group of countries, spoke out about the need to ensure women's involvement in all aspects of political processes and decision-making. They also signed a Joint Statement on advancing women's political participation, which President Obama highlighted in his address to the General Assembly last month. As President Obama said, "no country can realize its potential if half its population cannot reach theirs." President Obama challenged all states, including our own, to announce next year the steps they are taking to break down the economic and political barriers facing women and girls.

UN Women, under Michelle Bachelet's strong leadership, and other parts of the UN system also have a key role in helping to break down those barriers. This Committee can contribute to that effort. To that end, the United States, joined by cross-regional co-sponsors, will be tabling a resolution on women's political participation, with emphasis on periods of democratic political transition, for this Committee's consideration. The United States and the other co-sponsors welcome broad cross-regional co-sponsorship and support for the resolution, which builds on our previous resolution 58/142.

Another important aspect of women's empowerment that deserves all of our attentions is the issue of women's equal right to nationality. In particular, the consequences of nationality laws that discriminate against women are not sufficiently recognized. Such discriminatory laws have consequences that deprive women and their families of legal protections in their countries of residence, often for generations, and can ultimately lead to statelessness. In many cases, nationality laws permit only a child's father to transmit his citizenship or discriminatorily limit the ability of the mother to do so. In some cases, nationality laws strip women of their citizenship upon marriage to a foreign spouse, or prohibit women's foreign spouses from naturalization. Without recognition by any state, stateless persons typically lack identity documentation, and cannot register births, marriages, or deaths. Without such documentation, they often cannot work legally or travel freely. They cannot vote, open a bank account, or own property, and they often lack access to health care and other public services. Without birth registration or citizenship documents, children are often barred from attending school. For these reasons, stateless women and their families are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, including gender-based violence, trafficking in persons, and arbitrary arrest and detention.

The United States is seeking to raise global awareness of this under-recognized problem for women's rights and human rights—a problem that exists in as many as 30 countries around the world. Women's nationality rights are a factor in determining their political, economic and social empowerment, and influence their ability to contribute to democratic governance, peace and stability, and economic development in their countries. The United States urges governments throughout the world to repeal discriminatory nationality laws, and commends civil society groups that continue to advocate for women's equal right to nationality. We support the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' global mandate to prevent and reduce statelessness, including by providing technical assistance to eliminate discrimination against women in nationality laws. And we encourage other UN agencies, such as UN Women, UNDP, and UNICEF, to strengthen their work on this important issue.

Today I have focused on just two areas where together we can do much to empower women. Much remains to be done in other areas to advance women, including women's health, violence against women, economic empowerment, and education for girls. The United States remains committed to working with all of you on these areas as well. Together, we can ensure that women can contribute fully to peace, security, development, and prosperity.