

Department of Economic and Social Affairs
Office for ECOSOC Support and Coordination

Achieving Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment and Strengthening Development Cooperation

DIALOGUES AT THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL



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Department of Economic and Social Affairs

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Women empowerment: Lynchpin of development goals⁴

BY MR. ANDREW MITCHELL

Secretary of State for International Development
United Kingdom

It is a great honour to address this year's opening session of the ECOSOC High-level Segment. I am particularly pleased that the focus of this meeting is gender equality and the role of women in development, peace, and security. This is what we view that we in the United Kingdom consider to be particularly important. I hope that over the next few days, the ideas we share and the commitments we make will stimulate a renewed international effort to support the opportunities, right, health, and status of women and girls around the world.

As I said in my speech at the Carnegie Institute on Friday, the place of women and girls in development generally is impossible to overstate. Promoting gender equality is vital for meeting the MDGs and for creating prosperous, safe, and peaceful world, where women have better access to health services, to education, to economic growth. Their children are healthier and better education. As a result, economies flourish and societies are more peaceful.

By contrast, where women and girls are treated as inferior to men and boys, a vicious circle of limited education, poor employment opportunities, ill health, forced marriages and all too frequently violence and exploitation can be established and perpetuated. Focusing more support on girls offers an opportunity to replace that vicious cycle with a virtuous one that puts women at the heart of their families and their communities. As a result, women are able to bring in money to their families, get involved with local enterprises, and make sure their children are educated. These are vital agents of change.

The United Nations has an important leadership role on gender equality. It is good to see that it is recognized and reflected the need to do more. How-

⁴ From the 2010 ECOSOC High-level Segment, 28 June 2010.

ever, more needs to be done. The high-level plenary meeting on the MDGs in September is an important opportunity to put investment in women and girls at the very centre of an action agenda to meet the MDGs by 2015.

October will mark the 10th anniversary of the historic Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security to which the Secretary General has just referred. This resolution recognizes the vital role played by women in preventing and resolving conflict. I think, for example, of the brave Liberian women who, in 2003, stood in their capital city dressed in white and refusing to move until peace was reached. While women have a role in combating violence, they are also disproportionately affected by it especially sexual violence during conflict.

In February, the United Nations recognized the urgency of the situation by appointing its first special representative on sexual violence in conflict. I applaud the work of the United Nations in this area and call upon the international community to continue its work to protect women and to give them a greater role in creating peace.

The United Nations has also maintained and strengthened its support for all women. It must show leadership by mainstreaming and prioritizing gender equality in all its work. It must ensure that its efforts are as coherent and effective as possible in support of women's empowerment and in the promotion of women's rights and security. I understand negotiations to establish a single composite United Nations body to lead this crucial agenda. May they at last be near conclusion.

I urge all Member States to finish this process quickly so that the new entity can start this work as soon as possible. This requires sensibility and it requires a practical approach, putting aside ideology and politics in favour of common sense and determination to make a real difference to real women in real time in the real world. To that end, the new entity must be established and managed in a way which will command confidence of its financial contributors whose support it needs.

I look forward to the appointment of a strong and committed leader with the skills and enthusiasm to ensure that the new entity lives up to our expectations. I urge all of you here today to instruct your teams to go the final distance to make this happen. There are now just five years remaining before we reach the target date set for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

It is clear that we will only achieve those goals by putting a renewed focus on gender equality and women empowerment. I hope that through our dis-

cussion this week we can shine a spotlight on the rights and opportunities of women throughout the world. In doing so, we must pay particular attention to the issues of reproduction and maternal health.

Maternal health is the most off track of all the MDGs. Nowhere is this more evident than in fragile and conflict-affected settings. People living in these countries account for around one-fifth the population of the development world but disproportionately for around three-quarters of the total number of infant and under 5 death. They also represent some three-quarters of the births that take place unsupported by medical attendants. Despite signs of recent progress, more than a third of a million women die due to complications in pregnancy and childbirth each and every year. The majority of those deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries with young women, particularly vulnerable. Girls between the ages of 15 and 19 are twice as likely to die as those in their 20s.

It does not have to be like this. Melinda Gates said earlier this month "It's not that we don't know what to do or that we can't do it. It's that we haven't chosen to." We have within our grasp a golden opportunity, a perfect moment where we have the perfect technology and political will if not to eradicate maternal mortality, to reduce it significantly. And tackling the MDGs is, therefore, a major priority for the United Kingdom's new coalition government, where we have confirmed that we will stand by our commitment spending 7 per cent of our gross annual income by 2013, and will enshrine that in British law.

Last Friday, our Prime Minister, David Cameron, called on the General Assembly to create a strong package of support for maternal health focused around good quality care and stronger health systems. The United Nations can increase its impact on important issues, such as maternal mortality by using its resources and skills more strategically and adopting innovative approaches, such as Delivering as One. The Delivering-as-One approach allows the efforts of United Nations agencies to be coordinated, targeted, and more responsive to the needs of countries' government leading to more effective and efficient results on the ground. Innovative changes of this kind in the United Nations system are essential if it is to do more to improve the lives of women and girls worldwide and support wider development issues.

I applaud wholeheartedly and support the leadership shown by the United Nations Secretary General in launching a global effort to advance progress on women's and children's health and wholeheartedly support the Secretary-General's words on this today. This provides a historic opportunity to deliver

for women and children only through a concerted international efforts will we finally put an end to the travesty that is mothers dying on the very day that should be one of the happiest of their lives. Donors must play their part, partner countries, too, but now is the time for the private sector to step up and contribute alongside civil society and philanthropists.

Together, we can achieve this goal and ensure a better future for the world's poorest women and children. The United Kingdom will play its part in supporting this effort and I encourage other Member States to do so as well. Maternal health is not just about giving birth. It is about giving women choice, about whether and when they have children. A quarter of all women in sub-Saharan Africa want to delay or avoid their next pregnancy. These women want more for their children, not more children. Globally, more than 215 million women who want to delay or stop having children do not have access to modern methods of family planning. This unmet demand has real consequences for people's lives as indeed of the 75 million unintended pregnancies that each year results in 20 million unsafe abortions and nearly 70,000 maternal deaths. Improving reproductive and maternal health is the lynchpin of poverty eradication and it is only through giving women greater choice and access to family planning and safer births that we will lift communities from desperate poverty.

Over the coming months and years, I shall try to ensure that Britain embeds making progress on this in all our bilateral programmes working closely with the United Nations agencies, where appropriate, to take forward this vital agenda. Ladies and gentlemen, the evidence shows overwhelmingly that we will not be able to solve many of the problems facing our world today without an increased and sustained focus on girls and women.

My hope is that this years Economic and Social Council will draw international attention to this pressing issue and will secure broad support for reforms and innovations that enable the United Nations to contribute more effectively to gender equality. In that way, we can take advantage of this historic opportunity to empower women and girls and accelerate progress towards the MDGs.