

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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Reviewing ongoing progress in women empowerment and gender equality⁵

BY H.E. MRS. MOUSHIRA KHATTAB

Minister of State for Family and Population Affairs

Egypt

Egypt highly appreciates the efforts of ECOSOC and values the focus of this Substantive session on gender equality and empowerment of women, a huge challenge still facing global community and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development. Egypt is eager to utilize its current ECOSOC membership to further enhance its much appreciated efforts in this regard.

A special mention of thanks to the Secretary-General and his Deputy for their concerted efforts and deep commitment. The United Nations Calendar this year is marked by several landmark events. The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) launched the 15-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform of Action. The review was an opportunity for governments to take stock of the progress being made, including towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and sustainable development.

No fair observer can deny the progress achieved in many critical areas throughout our quest to empower women to equally enjoy their rights. Thanks to the collective efforts of the United Nations and its Member States, hundreds of millions of women are now free from discrimination and violence; enjoying their right to education; employment and participation. Many women now occupy leadership and decision-making positions.

One of our proud achievements, as we meet at the house of Nations, is its human rights system that has created a supportive environment, where rights are monitored with transparency and accountability, thanks to the reporting process, where state parties submit their reports to the treaty bodies and to-

⁵ Ibid.

gether they engage in a constructive dialogue. As state parties exert tireless efforts to honour their commitments, statistical averages are no longer accepted, as they hide disparities that deprive the most vulnerable of equal opportunities. Such transparency has enabled us to focus on the rights of those at risk, with women and children at the forefront. The system has also revealed linkages and interdependence between their rights. Universal Periodical Review has reinforced this direction.

Milestones, such as the Cairo International Conference for Population and Development; Beijing; United Nations General Assembly Special Sessions and its follow up are testaments to this success.

Many States were accordingly encouraged to enforce legal frameworks to protect the rights of women and children. Adequately mandated and well-resourced national entities were established to monitor such rights; National Action Plans were formulated; the role of civil society recognized and viable partnerships established. Participation of women and children has emerged stronger in making decisions that affect their lives; coalitions supportive of their rights have been established and strengthened.

Egypt has been at the heart of all of this. Under the leadership of Egypt's First Lady Suzanne Mubarak, gender equality and empowerment of women is a political commitment and a priority. Honouring our commitments under human rights treaties including CEDAW and CRC, we adopted a rights-based integrated development approach.

We engendered design and implementation of policies and budget tracking, with a view to allocating more resources for development programmes supportive of equality and the empowerment of women. Recognizing the pivotal role of national entities entrusted with monitoring and coordinating the rights of women and children, Egypt has come a long way. The National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM) was established well before the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Women National Committee, then National Council for Women (NCW); Family Courts; National Council for Women and National Council for Human Rights. Complaint mechanisms were established at the National Council for Women and National Council for Childhood and Motherhood. In 2009, these efforts were crowned with the establishment of the Ministry for Family and Population.

In all economic strategies, policies and action plans targeting poverty alleviation, Egypt focuses on and considers the respect, protection and fulfillment of women's human rights and fundamental freedom, including the right

to development and participation. It is mainstreamed into all policies and programmes aimed at the eradication of poverty. Women were granted equal civil and political rights, as well as rights to participate in economic, social and cultural development.

The National Council for Women prioritized the enhancement of women's participation in the hierarchy of economic management and processes to ensure coordinating and maximizing economic resources. This meant building the capacity of women, as we believe that investing in women and girls has a multiplier effect on productivity, efficiency, and sustained economic growth and that increasing women's economic empowerment is central to the achievement of the MDGs and to the eradication of poverty, the greatest global challenge facing the world today, and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development.

In a historical step, Egypt's Constitution was amended to allocate a quota of 64 seats in the Parliament for women. As a temporary affirmative action, we hope that it will enable women equal opportunity to assert themselves and to add to their competitive strength in the long run. The Egyptian woman has achieved great progress. "She" has become a minister, a judge, chancellor of one of the biggest universities and a Governorate Secretary General. In our quest to combat violence against women and children, we established a national action plan; we played a pivotal role within the study of the UNSG; and we established a legal framework and mechanisms that protect vulnerable children and compatible with CRC.

Egypt played an instrumental role at the regional and international levels. It suffices to mention the establishment of the Organization of Arab Women, which is graciously supported by Arab First Ladies. The Suzanne Mubarak Women for Peace Movement is playing a critical role to stop trafficking of persons. It wages the campaign "Stop Human Trafficking Now", launched an international help line, worked in the implementation of SC resolution 1325 and, in cooperation with UNODC, the movement implements UNGIFT. At the initiative of Egypt, the African summit in 2008 calls for drafting an international Action Plan to Combat Trafficking. The initiative was supported by the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Declaration (which Egypt currently chairs); similar support was given by NAM First Ladies, who consider the Action Plan to be a vital tool to protect women victims.

Back home, we adopted anti-trafficking legislation this year. We have recognized the close link between women's and children's rights and that

ensuring equal rights for the girl is the logical entry point for women empowerment. The part to women rights goes through the gates of the family and empowering it to assume its responsibilities as the first and most important institution that instills democracy and dignity in the hearts and minds of its members, males and females alike; an institution fully aware of the role of boys and men in achieving gender equality and empowerment of women. This is precisely our mission in the Ministry for Family and Population. This was important to prove that the inter-gender relationship is not a zero sum game, and that women regaining their rights do not come at the expense of men's rights.

A societal movement to uphold the rights of the girl was launched. Local communities played an exemplary role to break the silence surrounding taboos that violated the rights of the Girl, such as depriving her of education; subjecting her to genital mutilation; and exploiting her in early marriage. We launched the Girls Education Initiative that assured the vulnerable their rights to quality and active learning. Egypt became the first country to implement the UNSG initiative. UNICEF, our partner, documented our achievements. Our success in combating FGM went beyond our wildest expectations. We articulated a bottom-up societal refusal to the practice that led to its criminalization. The passing of the law criminalizing female genital mutilation (FGM) was a dream come true long held by advocates of Girls' rights. It crowns tireless efforts since the turn of the 20th century. The Egyptian girl will always proudly cherish and remember the day when she was effectively liberated of this utter violence and violation of her integrity and basic rights. 2009 witnessed a paradigm shift in combating child marriage. Perpetrators were brought to justice for the first time in Egypt's history; awareness-raising campaigns and family empowerment lead to the sharp decline in the practice.

The success of our efforts has lent itself to proving that all monolithic religions are vehemently opposed to discrimination or violence against females. In a great partnership, Christian and Muslim leaders combined their efforts and proved beyond doubt both religions' inherent respect for women; and that discrimination or violence are cultural practices and in no way religious teachings. FGM; for example; is practised in certain geographic areas by followers of all religions. We continue to disseminate correct information and enlightened interpretation of religious verses.

The challenges that still face the global community are, however, cause for considerable concern. It suffices to note that 62 years after the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights, slaves are free yet, millions of women across the globe are still victims of discrimination and harmful practices, suffer gender-based violence, economic discrimination and lack access to basic reproductive health services.

The recent economic and financial crisis, the food and fuel crises and the challenges of climate change have all had a profound impact on our efforts to achieve the internationally agreed MDGs. Each of these overlapping crises exacerbates existing gender inequalities, and threatens to undermine the progress made, so far, and makes it even more challenging to achieve the practical realization of gender equality.

Egypt attaches great importance to, and avidly supports, the establishment of the new gender entity aiming to consolidate the efforts of the United Nations in achieving gender equality and empowerment of women. As a co-chair of the NAM and the Group of 77 and China Coordination Committee, Egypt has strived to reach common ground; enabling this new entity to commence on a solid foundation to ensure its success, and we will continue to do so. We hope that the General Assembly adopts the resolution of the system wide coherence, establishing the entity before we leave New York.

There is a dire need to make the treaty bodies, including CEDAW and CRC, an integral part of the United Nations efforts to empower women, fulfill their rights and achieve the MDGs. The Concluding Observations and General Comments of Treaty bodies need sustained and not only seasonal attention when it is time for reporting. We need to continue the reform of United Nations treaty bodies systems, within the action plan to reform the United Nations by ensuring democratic practices. We aspire to closer interaction and coordination between the United Nations Headquarters in New York and in Geneva on human rights issues to a stronger role for the Human Rights Council in monitoring women's and children's rights. All of this must target the implementation of all the resolutions and recommendations agreed to, including the implementation of the Monterrey Consensus and CSW agreed conclusions. We need more coordination among the United Nations agencies, bilateral and multilateral donors. We look to an enabling environment for a responsible role of the civil society.

Achieving peace and ending occupation is a dire demand to achieve gender equality and full enjoyment of all basic and human rights for women. The sufferings of women in armed conflicts and under foreign occupation, in particular, Palestinian women as a special challenge for the global community that

needs to be promptly addressed by the international community to alleviate discrimination and all violations against those women who are deprived of all their inalienable rights.

In closing, democracy will remain far so long as half the humanity remains deprived of helping their communities with their most valuable contribution. We must not leave one stone unturned and Egypt lends its unwavering support to your efforts.