

## **Expert Group Meeting**

**“Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes,  
with particular emphasis on political participation and leadership”**

**organized by  
the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women  
Department of Economic and Social Affairs**

**in collaboration with  
the Economic Commission for Africa and the Inter-Parliamentary Union  
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## **Opening statement**

**Carolyn Hannan, Director  
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It gives me great pleasure to send a message to the opening session of the expert group meeting on “Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes, with particular emphasis on political participation and leadership.” I was looking forward to being present at this important meeting but was unable to attend, due to pressures of work in the follow-up to the 2005 World Summit.

I want to begin by thanking the Economic Commission for Africa and the Inter-Parliamentary Union for agreeing to collaborate with the Division for the Advancement of Women on the organization of this meeting. I would like to express the deep appreciation to the Economic Commission for Africa for hosting the meeting. I also gratefully acknowledge the tremendous support provided by the Director of the African Centre for Gender and Development, Ms. Thokozile Ruzvidzo, and her staff.

I would also like to acknowledge the excellent and long-standing collaboration the Division has had with the Inter-Parliamentary Union on women’s participation in decision-making. Most recently, it involved collaboration on the development of a Map of Women in Politics, which highlights the current status of women in parliaments and in the executive around the world and the remaining serious gaps and challenges in implementing the Critical Area of Concern from the Beijing Platform for Action – Women in Power and Decision-making.

I warmly welcome and thank the experts for accepting the invitation of the Secretary-General. I also extend a welcome to all other participants – members of Parliament and observers and colleagues from Governments and the United Nations system.

The Division for the Advancement of Women holds expert group meetings prior to each session of the Commission on the Status of Women as a means of ensuring access to the latest research and practical experience on the themes before the Commission. One of the themes before the Commission next year is “Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels.” To facilitate the development of agreed conclusions, an interactive expert panel will be held on this theme during the Commission. The results of this expert group meeting will be presented during the panel. The expert group meeting thus provides an extremely important opportunity to make a critical input to the Commission’s agreed conclusions which will provide the global consensus on this important topic.

The ten-year review and appraisal of implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was carried out at the 49<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission earlier this year. Member States reported the introduction of measures aimed at increasing the participation of women in decision-making at different levels. The ten-year review and appraisal clearly shows that, despite political recognition of the fundamental right of women and men to participate in political and public life, the gap between de jure and de facto equality in the area of power and decision-making remains wide. While the proportion of seats held by women in legislative bodies is the highest world average reached to date, and continues a trend of gradual but sustained growth, the pace of change

is clearly far too slow. Very few countries have at least 30 percent representation of women in parliament, which had been established as a target for 1995, and is still not achieved ten years later.

The Declaration adopted during the ten-year review and appraisal, while recognizing progress made, noted remaining gaps and challenges and called for accelerated implementation. Women's participation in decision-making will be one of the first topics to be considered by the Commission as part of the follow-up to the review and appraisal. We should therefore have a strong focus on implementation – on assessing achievement, gaps and challenges and outlining actions for moving forward. It is highly appropriate also that this critical topic will be considered during the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the Commission.

The outcome of the recent 2005 World Summit also reaffirmed commitment to the equal participation of women and men in decision-making. Member States resolved to promote increased representation of women in Government decision-making bodies, including through ensuring their equal opportunity to participate fully in the political process.

Ten years ago, the Platform for Action recognized that women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in achieving gender equality and empowerment of women. Women's equal participation in decision-making is a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account in political processes. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspectives at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved. Equal participation of women and men in decision-making ensures a more accurate reflection of the composition of society, which is fundamental to strengthening democracy and promoting its proper functioning.

The Platform for Action was adopted in the context of a world-wide movement towards democratization and opening of political processes in many countries, which provided enhanced opportunities to give women a political voice. The Platform recommended actions by Governments to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making in governmental bodies, the legislature and public administration entities. Women's more active participation and representation of the contributions, priorities and needs of women was seen as one important means to bring gender equality perspectives to bear on legislation and public policies and programmes.

The Platform called for, among other things, measures to promote and protect the equal rights of women and men to engage in political activities and have freedom of association, including membership in political parties and trade unions; measures in electoral systems to encourage political parties to integrate women in elective and non-elective public positions in the same proportion and at the same levels as men; measures to ensure that women can participate in the leadership of political parties on an equal

basis with men; and mechanisms and training to encourage women to participate in the electoral process, political activities and other leadership areas.

The specific actions recommended also included the setting of specific targets and where necessary the establishment of a positive action policy as well as the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities for both men and women. The Platform for Action further recommended the organization of leadership and gender awareness training; the development of transparent criteria for decision-making positions; and the creation of a system of mentoring.

The Platform also asked Governments to involve women actively in environmental decision-making at all levels. It called on Governments to increase women's participation in the media - including through aiming at gender balance through the appointment of women and men to all advisory, management, regulatory and monitoring bodies. The Platform called for increasing the participation of women in conflict resolution at decision-making levels.

To accelerate the implementation of action in these areas, the Commission on the Status of Women, at its forty-first session in 1997, adopted Agreed Conclusions which reaffirmed the need to identify and implement measures that would redress the under-representation of women in decision-making, including through the elimination of discriminatory practices and the introduction of positive action programmes.

The General Assembly, at its 58th session in 2003, adopted a resolution on women and political participation where it urged the development of a comprehensive set of policies and programmes to increase women's participation in decision-making, including the areas of conflict resolution and peace processes, by addressing the existing obstacles facing participation by women. The resolution also addressed the importance of generating political commitment for the promotion of the advancement of women and the goals of gender equality through the organization of awareness raising campaigns.

Two articles of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women deal with women's participation in political and public life. Article 7 obliges States parties to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in political and public life and to ensure that they enjoy equality with men in the political and public life of the country – including the right to vote and to be eligible for election; to participate in the formulation and implementation of government policy; to hold public office and perform public functions. The Convention includes the right to participate in non-governmental organizations and other associations. Article 8 obliges States parties to ensure that women have opportunities on equal terms with men to represent their Governments at the international level and to participate in the work of international organizations.

To provide further guidance, the Committee adopted general recommendation 23 (1997) on political and public life reflecting its authoritative understanding of the content of the articles, and related States obligations. The Committee has a broad understanding

of political and public life – which encompasses all levels of Government, from the federal or State to the local level, and including the international level. The Committee has also been concerned about the need to ensure women's participation in the leadership of the economy, including private sector, trade unions, and chambers of commerce, and at the tertiary level of education, particularly in the domain of science and research where women are underrepresented. It has also specified that public life includes public boards and local councils and the activities of organizations such as political parties, trade unions, professional or industry associations women's organizations, community organizations and other organizations concerned with public and political life.

In addition, general recommendation 25 on article 4.1 of the Convention, temporary special measures (2004) provides further guidance on the use of such measures as a necessary strategy to accelerate achievement of women's de facto equality, including in relation to articles 7 and 8.

Experience at different levels in the ten years since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing has shown the specific benefits of women's active involvement in political and public life. There are significant development dividends from women's agency and more effective partnerships between women and men. Where women are empowered politically, as well as socially and economically, and can actively participate in public life, the greatest gains are achieved by societies. While there are positive signs of change in women's participation in public life in many parts of the world, the pace of change is too slow and must be accelerated. It is imperative that the opportunities and constraints be identified and concrete strategies developed to utilize the opportunities and address the constraints.

Increasing the participation of women in the political life of a nation constitutes an important step towards democratization. Among other things, women's participation ensures diversity in contributions to policy-making and can offer new perspectives and development priorities. Despite political recognition of the fundamental right of women and men to participate in political life, the gap between de jure and de facto equality in the area of power and decision-making remains wide. Women are underrepresented at most levels of government, especially in ministerial and other executive bodies, and have made slow progress in attaining political power in legislative bodies. I will not go into discussion of progress in this area, as the representative from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Ms Julie Ballington, will provide you with this information. Issues of quotas will be covered by Professor Shirin Rai in her overview. I will instead give some examples of other areas of decision-making, to provide a broader context for the discussions.

There is little statistical data available on women in important judicial positions at national level, even at the level of the highest courts. Internationally, a breakthrough was achieved with the establishment of the International Criminal Court and the appointment of 7 women of 18 judges, as well as the appointment of a woman as Vice President of the Court. This was a direct result of affirmative action to achieve gender balance on the court.

While in many countries women's share of low and middle-level positions within media organizations has risen over the last decade, the number of women in senior decision-making positions remained very small – in both traditional media institutions of press, radio and television, and the newly emerging sectors of telecommunications, multi-media and e-media. Reliable and comparable data are scarce. A study published by the International Federation of Journalists found that although a third of journalists today are women, less than 3 per cent of senior media executives and decision-makers are women. The European Union database on women in decision-making shows that in 2001 only 9 per cent of senior management jobs in the telecommunication industry in Europe were held by women. Women are also under-represented in critical media advisory bodies, such as control boards of broadcasting agencies.

Comparable data is also needed on the academic world to confirm the picture which emerges from some countries. This indicates that while an increasing number of women are graduating from universities, both at graduate and post-graduate levels and often with better results than men, women are not gaining secure employment in academia or receiving funding for research to the same extent as men. In addition, women are seriously under-represented in higher decision-making positions, including as Chancellors. Figures from Sweden, for example, show that there are only a little over 10 per cent women as Chancellors, despite the good representation of women in parliament, government and civil service.

Little is known about women's equitable participation within non-governmental organizations (NGOs). There has been a significant increase in women's specific organizations and networks over the past decade and women have developed a powerful political voice. However, it is important not to accept that women should only be heard through their separate civil society organizations. Women should also be equitably represented in all NGOs and have access to decision-making within these organizations. This is another area where data is scarce, but anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that in many NGOs in all parts of the world, women are under-represented at decision-making levels, and gender equality concerns are often neglected.

Data collection and dissemination is even less systematic in relation to economic decision-making. It is only possible to discern some trends. Women's participation in high-level economic decision-making remains low even in the developed countries. According to ILO, women's share of management positions remains generally low, despite educational advances for women in many parts of the world. Research indicates that currently women constitute only 33 per cent of managerial and administrative posts in the developed world; 15 per cent in Africa; and 13 per cent in Asia and the Pacific.

Very little comparable data exists on the representation of women in the private sector. Statistics available from the Nordic countries, for example, illustrate that although women's participation in parliament and the public sector is high, women are seriously under-represented in the private sector, for example as CEOs or on corporate boards. In this context, Norway has initiated an important innovation, calling for gender balance on corporate boards by 2006, and announcing the intention to legislate in this regard if

corporations do not make this change themselves. This has already led to an increase in the number of women on boards.

There is little comparable data available on women's participation in international organizations. Statistics are available in individual organizations but are not compiled and used effectively at international level. In the United Nations, for example, as of March 2004, 37.1 per cent of all staff and 27.2 per cent of senior managers in the Secretariat were women. At the level of Resident Coordinators and Resident Representatives in the field, 2004 figures show that only 25 per cent were women in Latin America and the Caribbean; 26 per cent in Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States; 18 per cent in Africa; 12 per cent in Asia and the Pacific; and 17 per cent in the Arab States.

An illustrative example of the lack of equitable representation in international contexts can be taken from the diplomatic service. Statistics from some Ministries of Foreign Affairs show serious under-representation of women at higher levels. This has implications for the appointment of women as representatives of countries in international contexts. Of 191 Permanent Representatives to the United Nations in New York, only 17 are women – the highest number ever. In Geneva the total number of women ambassadors to the United Nations is 11; and the figure for the United Nations in Vienna is 18.

There are few women as Special Representatives of the Secretary General in the area of peace and security; and few women among peacekeepers and police in peacekeeping missions. Two out of 18 Special Representatives in peacekeeping missions are women; and five out of 50 Special Representatives and Special Envoys in other peace and security assignments are women. This is a reflection of low levels of women's participation in these areas at national level, as well as the failure of countries to nominate women as candidates. Attention to women's participation and representation in peace and security activities has, however, increased significantly since the adoption of Security Council resolution 1325 in 2000. The resolution specifically calls for an increase in the involvement of women, particularly in senior level positions. Since 2000, there has been an increased focus on achieving gender balance, including efforts to ensure women's representation on panels, in expert groups and in fellowship programmes. Peacekeeping missions have worked to promote gender balance in local police forces and worked directly with women's groups and networks to ensure incorporation of gender dimensions into elections, the constitution, legislation and recruitment policies for the civil service. Available data highlights some progress made but also illustrates that much more needs to be done.

Broader participation of women at local levels of decision-making may be an important first step toward women's meaningful participation at the national level. The International Association of Local Authorities has set the criteria of no more than 60 per cent representation of either sex in local assemblies. In India and in Pakistan one third of local government seats are reserved for women. This allows large numbers of women to enter political life for the first time. It is important to note, however, that the local context

is not always inherently more democratic or more open to women's involvement. Considerable specific support is required to ensure that women can participate effectively.

Among factors that impede women's participation in decision-making, and need to be specifically addressed, are the persistence of stereotypical attitudes, women's disproportionate share of household and family responsibilities, poverty, structural and cultural barriers, violence against women, the lack of equal employment opportunities, limited access to education, and traditional ways of working in political parties and other political institutions which discourage women from seeking political office, in particular leadership positions, through discriminatory attitudes and practices and lack of attention to mechanisms which support a balance between family and work responsibilities.

A concerted international effort – building on regional research and data collection - is required to more systematically collect, disseminate and use data on women's participation in all areas of decision-making in public life. Similarly, much improved databases on women leaders are needed to provide a resource to those seeking women for leadership positions in national, multilateral, intergovernmental and international organizations, including in the area of peace and security. Such databases are important at national level as well as at the global level.

Ensuring that both women and men will be able to influence decisions and resource allocations requires, however, going beyond simply increasing the number of women in different positions, to providing real opportunities for influencing the agendas, institutions and processes of decision-making. Values, norms, rules, procedures and practices can effectively restrict women's potential to make real choices, and make efforts to give explicit attention to relevant gender perspectives very difficult.

The objectives of the expert group meeting raise a number of critical issues for moving beyond describing the extent to which women participate in decision-making processes, and related potentials and obstacles to such participation. This expert group meeting can make a significant contribution by addressing these issues:

- The interplay between women's political and economic empowerment and participation;
- The impact of women's participation in decision-making on the conduct of political institutions and their outcomes;
- The linkage between women's increased participation and enhancing gender mainstreaming in political processes; and
- The role of capacity-building, coalition-building and gender-sensitive institutional policies for increasing women's participation in decision-making and the impact of their participation;

The expert group meeting has brought together many leaders in this field. I am fully confident that your knowledge, experience and expertise, from national, regional and global contexts, will provide important insights. I urge you to constructively seize the opportunity provided to move forward on women's participation in decision-making. I

am sure that the expertise gathered here will guarantee the success of the expert group meeting. I wish you productive discussions and an excellent outcome.

Thank you.