

CELEBRATING INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY (8 March)

at the United Nations at Geneva (a first) on 6 March 2009

Theme:

“The Economics of the Financial Crisis: Gender Equality and the Role of Women”

jointly organised by the Congo Committee on the Status of Women – Geneva,
and the United Nations NGO Liaison Office



Panel Presentation

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Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues and friends,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to celebrate with you today the International Women's Day. I wish to pay tribute to all women who are facing humanitarian challenges in the world today, to those who are working hard to survive, to educate their children and those who face all kinds of discrimination and violence. And in particular I wish to pay tribute to the 344 courageous community leaders who have received over the years the WWSF PRIZE FOR WOMEN'S CREATIVITY IN RURAL LIFE, which we award every year since 1994. I also include in my tribute the many rural women's groups in Mali who slowly but surely emerge from poverty due to regular micro credits which WWSF supports in their name.

And, we also celebrate our own birthday today. The Women's World Summit Foundation has come of age and is 18 years old today.

To take up the bold challenge of ending women's poverty, we must ask what, in a world of such wealth, talent and potential, is driving the process of gender inequality, the impoverishment and marginalization of women. Why is it that more and more women can work and do work, but never earn enough to take one step out of just surviving?

We know that women in Africa produce the bulk of the needed foodstuffs for the entire continent, more than 80 percent; that women contribute to the global economy as service providers, producers and managers, as entrepreneurs and investors in business, and through their unpaid work. In export industries, they provide as much as 80 percent of the labor force in sectors such as the textile or electronics industries. Women constitute the foundation for the “care economy” and are often the producers of free goods and services for households. Their informal or home-based work often subsidizes the formal sector. Nevertheless, women continue to face barriers to accessing the information, education, skills and credit needed to start new businesses and employment opportunities. For all these women, therefore, it is not just a matter of more equitable redistribution, but of taking on power relations and transforming power structures and systems.

Empowering women and to dismantle poverty requires a transformation of policymaking at all levels. It requires that women's work, paid and unpaid, is recognized and valued.

So how can we help create such a change?

We need to start with the RECOGNITION OF WOMEN'S ACHIEVEMENTS and their contributions to the whole of society, and not only focus on their neediness. We should aim at building their capacity and not only focus on their dependencies. It starts by building on women's skills and assets and amplifying their voice and influence. The many micro-credit schemes are a good beginning but more

needs to be done to keep these women from being micro-indebted over a long time and to begin to teach savings schemes and resource management tools.

Women have also already taken leadership in campaigns for greater corporate responsibility, developing innovative approaches such as corporate codes of conduct.

There is a growing outrage in the world today that with all the wealth in our world the international community could not come forth with the financial means to eliminate poverty and hunger. The UN estimated that 35 billion \$ per year would suffice to end hunger and poverty and 10 billion \$ per year to provide clean water and sanitation for all.

Reading in our newspapers that the international financial world of North America and Western Europe has so far injected 4000 trillion dollars to revive of the economy, one can only wonder why the amount to end hunger and poverty, a small fraction compared to what we see being injected as economic stimulus packages, could not be pledged by governments during the fat years of financial gains enjoyed before the crisis hit.

This is a million-dollar question the women of the world are asking our economic and political leaders today and

I take this auspicious gathering to propose on the International Women's Day that there is need for a 5th UN World Conference on Women, which would be a first since the Internet made worldwide communication easy and which could become the largest gathering, the most effective lobby ever held for the transformation of the economic space in which we live and which includes women from all walks of life. We should all lobby the Swiss government to host such a conference in Geneva – in the City of Peace and seat of Human Rights. What better place could to gather the women of the world.

But what I really wish to share with you today is a shift in the wind, a shift in the way we, women and women's organization leaders, involve MEN in our work and in particular encourage **MEN TO COMMIT TO END MEN'S VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN.**

I was recently invited to a European Conference in Stockholm where regional coordinators of the "Men Engaged for gender equality" organizations met to discuss their projects, including the White Ribbon campaigns, already operating in 47 countries. I was most impressed by so many earnestly seeking men who are committed to gender equality, to ending violence against women and who wish to spread their campaigns around the world.

When asked about Switzerland, and why there is no structure for such a campaign in my country, I committed my organization to see what we could do. To make a long story short, we launched the White Ribbon-Campaign Switzerland on 14 February 2009, coinciding with St. Valentine's Day.

So what the campaign all about? The campaign invites men to pledge never to commit, condone or remain silent about violence against women. This is the central message and it is a campaign by men for men. Women can also support the campaign by making sure that all the men in their lives know about the White Ribbon campaign, lobby them to join and to wear the white ribbon as a symbol of their pledge.

"Violence against women and girls continues unabated in very continent, country and culture and Switzerland is not excluded. It takes a devastating toll on women's lives, on their families, and on

society as a whole. Most societies prohibit such violence – yet the reality is that too often, it is covered up or tacitly condoned”, to quote the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon.

Violence against women is complex and diverse in its manifestations, with far-reaching and long-lasting consequences and costs. Its elimination requires a comprehensive, systematic and determined response, according to the Secretary-General’s in depth study on violence against women.

- Violence causes more deaths and disabilities among women aged 15-44 than cancer, malaria, traffic accidents and war combined.
- Violent behavior is condemned by law whether committed in the public or private sphere

Worldwide, there is compelling evidence that violence against women is severe and pervasive and that a significant proportion of women suffer physical, sexual or psychological violence. On average, at least one in three women is subjected to intimate partner violence in the course of her lifetime, according to the UN Study on Violence against Women.

In Switzerland, it is estimated that one in five women is a victim of physical or sexual violence in her relationships. One woman in five, aged 20-60 declares to have been a victim of physical or sexual violence committed by her partner

So what we are trying to say is that Men are neither violent nor bad by nature. However, many resolve to actions, which can have serious consequences. While some men are part of the problem, all men can be part of the solution! The White Ribbon campaign encourages men of all ages to commit themselves to create a world without violence against women, and the UN Director General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, mentioned in his Message on International Women’s Day-8 March the campaign as an example to lobby men to take a stand and “speak out against this stain in our society.”

This could also be the beginning of deconstructing the male identity with violence as a way of showing their masculinity in so many spheres of our societies, and it could be a first building block for disarmament. The Director-General of the UN office in Geneva, Mr. Sergei Ordzhonikidze, repeatedly calls on the women of the world to take on the issue of disarmament. Can women really move Mount Everest?

So what does the White Ribbon Campaign propose concretely?

To start, we selected 10 possibilities to help men prevent male violence against women:

1. Realize that gender violence is a men’s issue that affects the women we care about
2. Never remain silent - confront the abusive behavior of other men
3. Understand how our own attitudes and actions may perpetuate sexism. Work towards changing them
4. Offer help and support if we suspect a woman is being threatened
5. Respect women and treat them as equals
6. Ally with women who are working to end all forms of gender violence
7. Speak out against homophobia
8. Educate ourselves about masculinity, gender inequality and the root causes of gender violence
9. Mentor young men about ways to be men without degrading or abusing women
10. Refuse to purchase any magazines, videos or music that portrays women in a degrading or violent manner

While this list is not exhaustive, it is a beginning to generate a conversation about what men can do to end violence.

What does it mean to wear a White Ribbon?

Wearing a White Ribbon represents a person's pledge to never commit, condone or remain silent about violence against women. Men are invited to wear the ribbon all year long, if they wish, or at least during one week, starting 25 November - UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and/or continue during the 16 Days of activism to help end violence.

The objective is to sensitize civil society as a whole and make all of us conscious of the fact that violence against women is a world phenomenon, a systemic problem, rooted in unbalanced power sharing and unequal structures between men and women. Violence against women is a form of discrimination and a violation of Human Rights.

In concluding, let me stress that, together with our partners, we can achieve what we cannot do alone. MEN taking a stand for the end of violence against women is an idea whose time has come. If we don't end violence against women and children, we cannot evolve as a human race.

Thank you for your listening, enjoy International Women's Day, and don't forget to take a White Ribbon brochure and share it with your partner tonight.

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