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*Deputy High Commissioner's statement*

*Discussion on integration of a gender perspective  
in the Work of the Human Rights Council*

*20 September 2007*

Mr. President, Ambassador Nzomo, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted and honored to take part in this important discussion, and deeply grateful to the President and members of the Human Rights Council for creating this space within the formal calendar of the sixth session to discuss how a gender perspective can be integrated into the work of the Council.

As you know, integrating women's rights and the gender dimension into the work of OHCHR is a key priority for the High Commissioner and the Office. We are greatly encouraged that the Council shares the aim. This is particularly important as the Council finalizes its institution-building exercise and embarks upon its next phase with much promise for strengthening the universality of human rights and bringing greater effort to bear upon the implementation of human rights norms on the ground, around the world. With a new unit on women's rights and gender issues, OHCHR greatly looks forward to assisting in this endeavor.

I am personally very honored to be the Deputy to the High Commissioner and to assist her in all aspects of her the work at a very challenging and exciting time for the Office. But I hope you will allow me to speak today not just as the Deputy High Commissioner but also as someone who has worked for women's rights and gender equality in different capacities over many years.

The purpose of today's discussion, as I understand, is not to address the human rights of women and gender-related violations. There will surely be opportunities for the Council to address on an ongoing basis and in a substantive way issues related to the human rights of women and gender-related violations in future sessions. Our main focus today is on the process and approach, and I hope we can proceed with forthcoming views and open minds.

In this regard, I think it might be helpful if together we walk through the basics before we embark on what I trust will be our first of many more occasions to have a collaborative and consultative discussion.

Let us begin by clarifying what we mean when we say "integrating a gender perspective into the work of the Council". First of all, the term "gender" refers to the socially

constructed roles between women and men or the social differences that are learned. Gender roles are deeply rooted in every culture, but they are changeable over time and have wide variations both within and between cultures.

Of the multiple layers of our individual identity, gender is perhaps the most important. It determines how an individual is perceived in society, the roles we are expected to play as well as the access we have to resources, opportunities and power to influence decision-making.

Gender is clearly about both women and men, girls and boys. However, gender analysis has been driven by the need to address women and girls' needs and circumstances, as they have historically been more disadvantaged than men and boys. And the fact remains that despite progress made in achieving greater gender equality, women continue to be amongst the poorest and most marginalized segments of the population throughout the world, with limited access to rights, resources and opportunities.

Gender equality refers to the equal enjoyment by women and men, girls and boys of rights, opportunities, resources and rewards. Equality does not mean that women and men are the same but that their enjoyment of rights, opportunities and life changes are not governed or limited by whether they were born female or male.

The work of gender mainstreaming or integrating a gender perspective begins with the acknowledgement that gender equality is not only a goal but must also be made an integral aspect of sustainable human development and the achievement of all human rights for all. Since 1997, gender mainstreaming has been the strategy of the UN's long-standing work to address the social, political and economic disadvantages women face.

When ECOSOC adopted the strategy of "gender mainstreaming" it defined it as "the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality".

While gender mainstreaming has been a long-standing term, in more current analysis, the term "gender integration" has gained in usage. This reflects, I believe, a wide-spread frustration that a decade after its formal introduction, aside from entities whose main purpose is to advance women's status and rights, the gender mainstreaming strategy remains largely on paper, superficially understood and ineffectually implemented. A push for effectiveness and result explains the present currency of "integration" over "mainstreaming".

If we are aiming for result, I believe we need to work along a two-track approach for the UN system: redoubling the mainstreaming effort throughout the system on the one hand, and rallying around the entities in the system in charge of gender issues on the other.

Integration needs both: a process for the whole system as well as an entity with the clout and resources to forcefully drive the gender agenda. In this regard, I, as we all are, have much expectation for the establishment of an enhanced, consolidated gender architecture that is taking shape at UN headquarters.

In the same vein, in the Human Rights Council, we need to incorporate gender analysis throughout its work, but also to have a focused point for efforts that is set up in a way to have maximum impact in promoting and protecting women's human rights. In this regard, I would suggest that a very useful point of entry would be to look at the laws. Laws are the first guarantor of rights, and human rights are best promoted and protected by the rule of law.

Thus, an integral part of efforts to realize equal rights for women must focus on the laws implemented, or not implemented, on the ground. Where laws guaranteeing the equal rights of women continue to be slighted, where laws that are blind to the different impact on women and men continue to be enforced, where women's access to justice to claim their rights is limited, or where laws continue to exist that discriminate against women, gender equality remains a dream.

Member States have made commitments to repeal discriminatory laws and to ensure equal protection of the law in many human rights treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Member States also made a specific commitment to revoke discriminatory laws and remove gender bias in the administration of justice at the fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. This commitment was reasserted at a Special Session of the General Assembly in 2000 with the aim of attaining this goal by 2005. A review by the Commission on the Status of Women on the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Beijing in 2005 was extremely disappointing in this regard. On the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of CEDAW, the CEDAW Committee also expressed concern that "in no country in the world has women's full de jure and de facto equality been achieved."

As we are all aware, de jure discrimination is incompatible with international human rights law. De facto discrimination is even more endemic. But I believe we must get the laws right before we can expect changes in attitudes and practices, not the other way around. Laws codify the substance of human rights. They are also the basic tools. Promoting and strengthening legal frameworks that clearly prescribe gender equality and equal rights for women – this, I believe, is a key task for the Council and all who have a stake in its work.

It is with these comments that I would like to conclude my intervention. I am eager to listen to the presentations of the other panelists, all distinguished experts who have made important contributions to women's rights, and anticipate a lively exchange of views.

Thank you.