

# UNITED NATIONS IN FOCUS

No. 5  31 MARCH 2010

## 2010 COMMISSION ON STATUS OF WOMEN ADVANCES KEY ISSUES FOR WORLD'S WOMEN

**F**or more than 3,500 civil society representatives and hundreds of government delegates who traveled, often long distances, to New York for this year's Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), it was an occasion to mark large and small victories over the last 15 years and to focus on the challenges that remain.

It has been 15 years since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action were adopted, concluding one of the most influential global meetings ever held – the Fourth World Conference on Women. During its two-week session from 1-12 March, the CSW focused on assessing what has been achieved since the Beijing Conference, on sharing experiences and good practices and outlining priority actions. In addition, nearly 100 side events were organized by UN agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the private sector and governments.

The following four areas of priority importance to women were discussed by the Commission:

### MATERNAL MORTALITY

The Millennium Development Goal to improve maternal health – and the affiliated target of reducing the rate of maternal mortality by three-quarters – has been the most elusive target of all. Lack of decisive progress in this area has been matched by a lack of reliable statistics, and a failure to attract large-scale support. Best estimates are that in 2005 more than half a million mothers died as a consequence of childbirth.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon recognized the conundrum at last June's Global Health Forum. He said that "people often call an issue on which all can agree a 'motherhood issue' ... however, motherhood itself has not yet become a motherhood issue."

But the Secretary-General also detected a "tipping point" in international concern, as the outcome of the 2009 World Health Assembly included a special focus on maternal health, and global philanthropies stepped up their commitment of resources to this goal.

With a strong CSW resolution adopted at the March session on eliminating maternal mortality and morbidity, with the Secretary-General's planned launch of a global framework for action to fast-track progress on women's

### Through the adoption of seven resolutions at the conclusion of its 54th session, the Commission on the Status of Women:

**Urged Governments – with the support of civil society and the private sector – to take all steps to empower women and girls to protect themselves against HIV infection;**

**Called upon all parties to armed conflict to release women and children taken hostage, and reaffirmed that hostage-taking is an illegal act aimed at destroying human rights;**

**Urged continued special attention to the promotion and protection of the human rights of Palestinian women and girls;**

**Called upon Member States to take all necessary measures – including enacting and enforcing legislation – to address and eliminate harmful traditional practices, especially female genital mutilation;**

**Urged States to develop and implement specific policies and programmes to promote economic empowerment, including through enhancing women's access to full and productive employment and accelerating women's full participation in economic decision-making;**

**Urged global and national leaders to generate the political will, resources, commitment, cooperation and technical assistance urgently required to reduce maternal mortality and morbidity, and improve maternal and newborn health;**

**Welcomed the General Assembly resolution on establishing a new UN entity for gender equality and the empowerment of women.**

and children's health, and with the selection of this issue as the "top priority" of the host country, Canada, for the G8 meeting in June, there is reason to believe that the imperative to save mothers' and infants' lives will gain added momentum over the remaining five years of the drive to reach the MDGs by 2015.

### VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Violence against women is a pandemic behind closed doors – it is calculated that up to 70 per cent of women experience violence in their lifetime. It not only inflicts personal suffering, but "undermines development, generates instability, and makes peace in society much harder to achieve," as noted by the Secretary-General at a panel discussion at this month's Commission.

Margot Wallström, his newly appointed Special Representative on sexual violence in conflict, departs for the Democratic Republic of the Congo in April. On her return, she will report to the Security Council.

In the meantime, action on the Secretary-General's *UNITE to End Violence against Women* campaign has moved to the regional and national levels, with particular emphasis on the first of the campaign's five goals - the adoption and implementation of national laws on violence against women.

## ROLE OF WOMEN IN DECISION-MAKING

An Inter-Parliamentary Union survey found that women comprise 18.8 per cent of members of parliament worldwide - an all-time high, although this falls short of the 30 per cent target advocated in Beijing.

Rachel Mayanja, the Secretary-General's Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, describes the representation of women in parliaments as "an accountability issue." She finds that countries where women are under-represented in government tend to be "less inclusive, less egalitarian and less democratic."

Under-representation in decision-making positions can be self-perpetuating, in that it limits the incorporation of gender perspectives into policies. For example, the absence of women in top positions in peace processes limits the attention given to gender in peace agreements. Since 1992, women have constituted only 7.1 per cent of official delegation members in negotiations, and only 2.1 per cent of signatories to peace agreements, according to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Very few have been formal mediators.

### UN Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro on maternal mortality

*"My formative professional experience was working as a Legal Aid attorney, and I will never forget the heartbroken families who came to see me seeking redress after their loved ones had died in childbirth.*

*I understand their pain even more now because I, too, have lost friends. Not in the villages, either, but in the cities, where you might think the services are far better.*

*In far too many parts of the world, when a woman goes into labour, relatives and friends do not go so far as to say goodbye, but they are often thinking, is this the last time they will see her? And the reverse is also true. . . .*

*When I was giving birth to my second child, I had the same fear. I was wondering whether I would get out of the room alive, whether my kids would survive, and this is just a few years ago, just about ten years ago. Isn't it an irony that, just as we celebrate an impending birth, we fear an imminent death. . . ."*

- 15 June, 2009



"History has taught us that any peace not built by and for women is far less likely to deliver real and lasting benefits," said US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, speaking at the Commission 15 years after her seminal address to the Women's Conference in Beijing.

## NEW GENDER ENTITY

The General Assembly adopted a resolution late last year paving the way for the creation of a new UN body for gender equality and the advancement of women, and Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has submitted his proposals for the entity to the General Assembly for their consideration.

The importance of moving ahead with the creation of this new entity was repeatedly and emphatically highlighted throughout the Commission's 15-year review session. In his remarks at the official observance of International Women's Day (8 March), the Secretary-General made it clear that it was now up to Member States to act, urging Governments to adopt a resolution creating a new entity "without delay."

His plan would merge four separate UN units with differing mandates: the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI); the Division for the Advancement of Women in the Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DAW/DESA); the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM); and the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW).

There has been strong support for the creation of a unified body that would strengthen the participation of women in international affairs and give the UN a stronger mandate on women's issues. However, different strategic approaches have emerged from the discussion of this issue. Some Member States stress gender equality, ensuring full rights and legal protection. Many from the developing world place more emphasis on "advancement," entailing a strong pro-women development agenda.