

UNITED NATIONS



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THE DEPUTY SECRETARY-GENERAL

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**REMARKS AT PANEL DISCUSSION ON “WOMEN’S
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP — IN
PURSUIT OF EQUALITY”
COMMEMORATING THE THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF
DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN**

New York, 9 July 2012

Madam Chair,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour and joy for me to celebrate with you the thirtieth anniversary of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

The experts on today's panel bring a world of perspectives and experience to our discussions, and I know we all look forward to hearing from them. Like the members of CEDAW, they come from different backgrounds, yet they share the same strong commitment to women's rights, women's equality and women's dignity.

Let me begin by saying that the Secretary-General very much wished to attend this session. He is leading the global campaign for women's equal rights, and although he could not be here today, he brings your concerns with him wherever he goes.

While I am new to the post of Deputy Secretary-General, my Office has a longstanding commitment to this cause. My predecessor, Asha-Rose Migiro, was herself a member of CEDAW. She maintained a strong commitment to women's empowerment through all of her assignments. I pledge to build on her outstanding contributions and to advance this cause to the best of my ability. That means making sure that the Committee's recommendations are better integrated into the work of the UN, including into the area of peace and security.

Today I hope to frame our discussions by looking back at how much CEDAW has accomplished and looking ahead to the challenges we still need to tackle.

Ladies and gentlemen,

One of the "founding mothers" of human rights at the United Nations was Eleanor Roosevelt, who as you know made a major contribution to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

When she first came to the United Nations, her own government did not know where to place her.

In her own words, the reaction of the men was, “We can’t put Mrs. Roosevelt on the political committee. What would she do on the budget committee? Does she know anything about legal questions? Ah, here’s the safe spot for her — Committee Three. She can't do much harm there!”

We all know that Committee Three dealt with human rights.

Like Eleanor Roosevelt’s entry to the United Nations, the first meeting of the CEDAW began without much fanfare.

In a small conference room in Vienna in October of 1982, CEDAW experts addressed a series of procedural questions that had to be dealt with before they could delve into substantive issues.

From that modest beginning, CEDAW grew to provide a dynamic interpretation of the Convention and later its Optional Protocol. Now, this Committee stands as a strong and internationally respected voice for the rights of women and girls everywhere.

Over the years, 187 countries have endorsed the treaty, hundreds of reports have been reviewed, and numerous reservations have been withdrawn or changed. The combined effect has transformed the lives of countless women and girls throughout the world.

CEDAW tackles human rights issues that have been neglected for too long, including discrimination against lesbian, bisexual and transgender women. This has contributed to our broader campaign to end this heinous and at times deadly violation of their human rights.

The Committee makes it a point to seek the views of national human rights actors and United Nations agencies. The Secretary-General and I are keen to deepen our collaboration with a range of partners to reach our common goals.

Perhaps most important, the experts on this Committee encourage women from non-governmental organizations to speak up and to be heard on an international stage. They are now part of many United Nations campaigns, including the Secretary-General's own global campaign - "UNiTE to End Violence against Women".

The rising chorus of these women's voices has contributed to a growing understanding of the importance of women's political participation and leadership.

One milestone was the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000. This was the first time that the Council explicitly recognized how critical it is to include gender perspectives in peace negotiations, in planning relief operations, in conducting peacekeeping operations and in helping countries rebuild from war.

The resolution was visionary for understanding that women were more than victims of war. They could be drivers of peace.

Rwanda is a clear example. During the genocide in 1994, half a million women were raped. Hundreds of thousands of others suffered horrific abuses. But since then, women moved to the centre of the country's political life. There are more women in Rwanda's Parliament than men, and more women than in any other parliament in the world. We must continue to push for women's political empowerment in all countries.

As for the United Nations itself, we are committed to leading by example. Our policy is to find the best person for every job. We see the results where we field our operations. In Liberia, after we sent in an all-female Formed Police Unit, the number of local women signing up to join the country's police force increased dramatically.

But this is not only about numbers. Women are capable of doing the jobs a man can do, from patrolling dangerous areas to rescuing victims from disasters. Women can also bring added value by making other women feel more comfortable in sensitive situations.

I am pleased to say that we are nearly halfway to our target of having women make up 20 per cent of all UN Police. I am confident that under the Secretary-General's leadership, we can meet and exceed that goal by our target date of 2014.

This is just one area where the United Nations is committed to putting women into leadership positions. But political participation and leadership begin long before women are sworn into office.

To understand what it takes to raise women leaders, we need only to go back to this visionary Convention.

From addressing discrimination to guaranteeing basic rights; from education to employment to health; from laws and family life to policy measures, this treaty covers the spectrum of human rights and the lifespan of women.

The Convention requires States to promote women's political participation and to uphold the core principles of non-discrimination and equality.

Our ultimate means in achieving equality in political leadership is to realize these fundamental rights for all women and girls.

That is our challenge. Those are the stakes. And that is why we need all of the experts on CEDAW, we need governments, we need NGOs and we need citizens – women and men everywhere – who understand that equality makes us all stronger.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We all know that human rights are endowed to everyone from birth, but all too often they are only realized through strenuous struggles against prejudice, injustice and oppression.

The struggle for women's equality has made major advances – but it is far from won. Let us keep up the fight.

Thank you.