

Check against delivery

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
50th Session



Opening Address by
Ms. Navi Pillay
High Commissioner for Human Rights

Madam Chairperson,
Distinguished members of the Committee
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the fiftieth session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

I have not had an opportunity until now to welcome the new members of the Committee who took up or resumed their functions during the last two sessions in January and July.¹ I have no doubt that with your expertise you will all greatly contribute to the work of the Committee. I would also like to warmly congratulate Ms. Pimentel on her election as the new Chairperson of the Committee at the 48th session as well as the new members of the Bureau: Ms. Ameline, Ms. Popescu and Ms. Rasekh as Vice-Chairs, and Ms. Awori as Rapporteur. I am confident the Committee will continue to produce high quality work under your leadership.

¹ Ms. Feride Acar, Ms. Olinda Bareiro-Bobadilla, Ms. Maria Helena Lopes de Jesus Pires, Ms. Patricia Schulz and Ms. Ismat Jahan. Ms. Acar is not a new member of the Committee, having been a former Chair.

Human Rights Situation

Looking at the current situation of human rights in the world, we are faced with towering human rights challenges, such as the food emergency in the Horn of Africa. As in every crisis, women are especially affected: they are the most vulnerable to malnutrition, they struggle to survive as small-scale farmers and they are forced to make difficult choices about how to best care for their families under impossible circumstances.

As the debt crisis unfolds in Europe, America and elsewhere, we are witnessing a wave of drastic social cuts, which carry the risk of dire repercussions on economic, social and cultural rights – especially in relation to people who are already living in precarious situations, including women with disabilities, minority and indigenous women, older women and rural women.

My staff and I have devoted considerable attention to critical country situations in the Middle East, North Africa and other parts of the world. The Human Rights Council has led global calls for accountability for gross violations of human rights and serious violations of international humanitarian law by establishing international commissions of inquiry for Libya, Syria and Cote d'Ivoire. The increased attention that the Security Council is paying to human rights is also notable. I am increasingly called upon to brief its

members about critical situations, as I recently did on Libya, Syria and the Sudan.

As part of our response to the “Arab Spring”, my Office set-up a country office in Tunisia and negotiations are underway to establish a regional office in Egypt. In both countries, women played a pivotal role in the protests and likewise should play a prominent role in the political transition. It is clear that women’s true parity with men in any country in transition will be an important factor in the development of society. No country can become a mature democracy if half its population does not enjoy equal rights in law and practice.

I observe more and more countries calling on the Office for technical assistance, an extremely important facet of our work, aimed at bringing about systematic improvements: building the capacity of women’s groups; training police, security forces and judiciaries or advising on the drafting of anti-discrimination legislation. In many of our activities, we are guided by your recommendations.

The Human Rights Council just ended its session, during which the Council also held its annual discussion on the integration of a gender perspective in its work. The President of the Council Ambassador Laura Dupuy Lassere, the first woman serving in this position, highlighted the need to fight discrimination against women both in law and practice, and also noted that discrimination and

violence against women did not just affect women but had repercussions on their families, communities and countries. The Council reiterated the importance it attaches to the work of your Committee.

In the meanwhile, the Council's Working Group on the elimination of discrimination against women in law and practice has taken up its work. I understand that members of your Committee and the independent experts of the Working Group have already established close ties and that you will meet again during the current session. I welcome this close collaboration.

A couple of weeks ago, I participated in the high level segment of the General Assembly, where Brazil's first female head of state, President Dilma Rousseff, received many rounds of enthusiastic applause for her opening speech that focused on the rights of women. President Rousseff acknowledged that her "country, like every country in the world, still has much work ahead of it when it comes to empowering women". Your recommendations are vital in guiding State parties that have to take on this task.

Treaty-Body Strengthening

You are all aware that in 2009, I called on different stakeholders, including States and civil society organizations, to provide their views and suggestions on ways and means to strengthen the treaty body

system. The consultation stage of this process, which started in Dublin in November 2009, continued with different stakeholders in Marrakech, Poznan, Seoul, Sion and Pretoria.

In Sion, 150 participants, representing more than 90 countries, gathered to discuss with the Chairpersons or other representatives of all the treaty bodies ways of improving the treaty body system. The treaty body strengthening process is a priority for me and I attended the entire session. The Sion meeting highlighted the resource requirements of the treaty bodies. The level of resources never increased to match the growing number of treaty bodies and procedures adopted by them, including follow-up procedures. The capacity to service further meetings is stretched to the maximum. A more dramatic reduction than was anticipated is now foreseen in the budget of the United Nations Secretariat, which will have a further negative impact on its ability to translate documents on time.

I know you have experienced what this means for your work, and I share your frustrations. As I stressed in Sion, an effective treaty body system needs to be resourced properly. This year's report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly on measures to improve further effectiveness, harmonization and reform of the treaty body system presents a possible way forward: a functional system whereby the resource needs for the work of the treaty bodies would be reviewed

periodically, instead of having to continue to rely on ad-hoc requests for additional meeting time.

Further consultations on treaty body strengthening will take place with academics and UN actors and selected regional mechanisms this month. Furthermore, a meeting on the individual communications procedure will take place in October, where you will be represented by Ms. Dubravka Simonovic. A wrap-up meeting will be held in Dublin in November of this year and I will present my report in early 2012.

There are many messages that are coming out of the meetings held so far. One key demand is that all treaty bodies align their engagement procedures, instead of multiplying them in different forms and formats. The key message of States is clearly one of austerity and self-discipline, particularly in respect of the so-called “non-mandated activities” undertaken by nearly all treaty bodies, such as follow-up procedures, and the development of general recommendations.

I hope that the Committee will make time during this and its next session to express its views on the proposals that my Office has compiled about treaty body strengthening. Several are quite straight forward and appeal to our common sense. Others are far-reaching proposals that require some profound reflection, most of all by the treaty bodies. I would be eager to learn of your views.

As treaty body experts are at the heart of strengthening the treaty body system, you are the ones that can bring about change and will succeed if you are determined and united around a shared vision. In respect of harmonization, only you can bring about change on the basis of the shared vision that is progressively emerging. Meanwhile, resources are clearly the responsibility of States. It is unacceptable in my view that a lack of resources should weaken the oversight mechanisms to which States parties have given their voluntary and binding consent.

Chairpersons's Meeting

A number of important decisions were taken by the Treaty Bodies' Chairpersons during their 23rd meeting. The Chairpersons decided to engage in a drafting process of guidelines on the independence and expertise of members of treaty bodies. While noting that the autonomy and specificity of treaty bodies should be respected, the Meeting of Chairpersons recommended that the Chairpersons be empowered to adopt measures on working methods and procedural matters which are common to all treaty bodies. Chairpersons will consult with their respective committees on these matters in advance, and if a treaty body is not in agreement with the measures adopted by the chairpersons, it may subsequently dissociate itself from it.

I am also pleased that the next meeting of Chairpersons (June 2012) will be held in Africa allowing them to interact with the African regional mechanisms and other local actors. In addition, please note that the Inter-Committee Meeting has been suspended by the Chairs. Instead my Office could support a substantive meeting or working group if deemed necessary by the Chairpersons. I appreciate the role of your Committee in promoting coordination and harmonization and am pleased to learn that you have established a Working Group to strengthen and rationalize the working methods of the Committee. I am also pleased to learn of your intention to meet with the Human Rights Committee at this session.

UN greening policy

Finally, I would like to applaud the welcome trend among the treaty bodies to implement the UN greening policy. You can see before each of you the thousands of pages which have been printed for your folders, most of which will be thrown away at the end of the session. The UN as a whole is gradually reducing the production and distribution of hard copy documents, and some Committees have already conducted paperless sessions. I understand that the Committee has taken some measures to reduce the production of paper copies during its last two sessions. I would like to wholeheartedly encourage

you to give some serious thought to conducting “green sessions” in the future.

I wish you a very successful and productive 50th session and open the floor for any questions or comments from the Members.
