

ECOSOC Roundtable 5: Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women  
March 17, 2005 - Charlotte Bunch

*The following speech was given as part of a Panel organized by UNIFEM to look at what contribution the Millennium Summit +5 Review, to be held in September in New York, could make to forwarding gender equality and women's empowerment in the Context of the Beijing Plus10 Review recently concluded in New York.*

After the reaffirmation of the Beijing Platform For Action (BPFA), the one point of major agreement and constant reference in the B+10 review process was the need to take the BPFA & gender equality forward into the Millennium Summit + 5 Review.

As the large numbers of NGOs and government delegates who attended the review session just held by the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in NYC showed, women are one of the strongest constituencies that support and believe in the UN. Women still look to the UN as a vital arena for work toward the advancement of our human rights and have expectations that the Summit will forward this cause as well.

Throughout the B+10 process, Governments and NGOs alike stressed that the MDGs and the broader vision of the Millennium Declaration cannot be achieved without gender equality and women's empowerment. Their success depends on implementing the BPFA and CEDAW (the women's convention) which outline both norms and strategies for realizing gender equality and women's human rights – norms and strategies that have evolved tremendously over the 30 years since the First International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City.

Over and over, in the past decade, it has been demonstrated that women's participation and empowerment is central to ending poverty in communities, to children's well being, to stemming the HIV/AIDS crisis, to peace-making and peace-keeping, etc.

So too, the Millennium Declaration states that empowerment of women is an effective way “to combat poverty, hunger, disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable,” and it resolves to combat violence against women and to implement CEDAW.

Yet, so little political capital and even fewer real resources have been expended toward these goals of gender equality that one has to question the commitment to this rhetoric. When every CSW resolution evokes the statement that “there are no resource implications,” to it, one asks: Are they serious about these issues? Clearly advancing the equal rights of all women in all our diversity requires the commitment of greater resources and political will.

Even in the road map of the Millennium Development Goals, where goal - #3 specifically calls for gender equality and women's empowerment, still there was only one concrete target set - dealing only with equality in the context of primary education. And that target which was to be met in 2005 is far from having been achieved.

The Task Force on Goal #3 in its report, *Taking Action: Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women*, does however go much further and identifies seven strategic priorities “as the minimum necessary to empower women and alter the historical legacy of female disadvantage.” Those priorities are:

- Strengthen girls’ access to education, secondary as well as primary
- Guarantee sexual and reproductive health and rights
- Invest in infrastructure to reduce women’s and girls’ time burdens
- Guarantee women’s and girls’ property and inheritance rights
- Eliminate gender inequality in employment
- Increase women’s share of seats in national and local governments
- Combat violence against girls and women.

These seven strategic priorities are a useful place to begin in concretely seeking to achieve gender equality and women’s empowerment. Fortunately, Secretary General Kofi Annan used these as the basis of his speech in the opening session of the CSW, and hopefully his report for the Millennium Summit Review will also address these themes.

1. One contribution of the Summit therefore would be to reinforce the priority of gender equality as central to all the MDGs. In particular both the issues of violence against women and sexual and reproductive rights – issues that were central to the UN conferences of 1990s - are missing in the MDGs.

No issue better illustrates the insecurity that plagues half the world's population than violence against women. Yet it is missing not only in the MDGs, but also in the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change. Even more than in the MDGs, the Threats and Challenges Report is missing an integration of the gender dimensions of questions of security in our world. One must ask in reading this report, whose security is it supposed to defend? What about the insecurity of women in everyday life – the insecurity caused by poverty, violence against women, and the lack of reproductive rights?

2. The second contribution of the Summit must therefore be to fully integrate gender throughout and to see its centrality in all the topics – the threats and challenges security proposals as well as the MDGS.

For example, macroeconomic policies and poverty reduction strategies cannot be gender blind if they are to succeed in poverty eradication. HIV/AIDS strategies must take up the impact of violence against women on the spread of the infection or they are doomed to fail. Implementing Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security must be seen as an integral part of peace-keeping if peace is to prevail, etc.

3. Another contribution that the Summit can make is to bring back more forcefully the human rights based grounding of the Millennium Declaration and the UN World conferences held in the 1990s, such as the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, the World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995, as well as the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995.

Women rallied to the cry of “women’s rights as human rights” in the 1990s, and the development of norms on matters like VAW and women’s housing, property and inheritance rights has advanced in the past decade. But the mechanisms of accountability for these norms must be strengthened - both thru the CEDAW Committee and throughout the human rights system. The integration of gender has been evolving in important - if not yet complete - ways, such as the recognition of unnecessary maternal mortality as a violation of the right to life and the acknowledgement of some forms of VAW as torture, and of rape as a war crime.

Yet, just as women's rights have begun to make it onto the human rights agenda, one senses an erosion of support for human rights overall, which the Summit must also address. (For example, I note that in the Annex List of Major UN Conferences that accompanied the draft program for these two days of preparation for the Summit, both the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993 and the World Conference Against Racism - also a human rights conference held in Durban in 2001 – were omitted.)

After 30 years of women's conferences and other organizing for women's rights in the UN context, gender sensitive norms and strategies have been evolving -- through the conferences but also through national plans of action, UN agency programs, CEDAW and other international and regional human rights instruments. This is a rich body of work to draw upon.

However, the national and international commitment to the resources and institutional infrastructure necessary to realize these evolving norms and strategies at every level – local to global - has not grown adequately. Clearly the B+10 review showed that once again the actions of governments have not matched their promises.

Making gender equality and women's empowerment happen is not “rocket science.” There are many practical strategies to address this, but it requires deeper commitments not only to resources but also to changes in attitudes and institutions ... deeper no doubt than many of us realized as we began this work.

For example, we need to look at why it has been so difficult – nationally and globally - to even approach the goal set in Beijing of having a critical mass of at least 30% women in political decision making. Why have only a handful of countries come close to this goal, and those only with some form of affirmative action?

4. The Millennium Summit provides an opportunity as part of its MDGs agenda but also as part of the UN Reform discussion to address these questions of institutional change. Nationally as well as globally, we need both effective, results-driven gender mainstreaming, and effective, adequately resourced women's units to bring us closer to both achieving the MDGs and to realizing gender equality more broadly.

Measures need to be taken to upgrade and better resource the gender related mechanisms within the UN and at the national level. In addition, work needs to be done to understand better how to integrate a gender perspective into all areas of UN work.

Women's rights advocates need to raise these issues in national level discussions of the MDGs, and at the Millennium Summit review as well as here at the UN in an on-going way.

The Summit review can set the tone for the next decade of global action. We must seek to ensure that it is a tone that sees gender equality and the human rights of women as central to all its deliberations --- on the MDGs, on the security agenda, --- on seeking to create a world that advances the goals of the UN: human rights, development, and peace.