

Civil Society Hearings with the GA on the 2005 UN World Summit

Freedom to Live in Dignity (Human Rights) Cluster, June 23, 2005

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It's a pleasure to speak here as one of the women's human rights groups working to bring a gender perspective to the Summit process.

I will address our concern that the draft Outcome Document does not adequately recognize that the promotion of women's equality and human rights is central to the achievement of human rights, security, and sustainable development. I will also speak to how the proposed human rights reforms affect women's human rights.

There has been significant advancement in addressing the human rights of women through the UN world conferences of the 1990s and in the work of the UN over the past decade. Therefore we were alarmed that these issues were marginalized in the Secretary General's Report – "In Larger Freedom."

For example, no issue better illustrates both the great in-security and the denial of human dignity that plagues half the world's population than violence against women – yet it is barely an afterthought in this document. Ending impunity for gender-based violence should be a top priority as a cross-cutting issue of human rights, security, and development.

The human rights of women are still largely unprotected in much of the world today, and furthermore, efforts to realize and defend these rights are under intense attack in many places around the world. What we therefore need from the UN at this summit is a vigorous defense of women's universal right of access to their human rights and of those who are the defenders of the human rights of women.

We welcome the new paragraph 9 in the revised Outcome Document which reaffirms women's human rights as central to the issues of the summit, but we note that these commitments have been made before.

What women need now is concrete, specific and time bound plans and resources for implementation of the promises made in Nairobi, Vienna, Cairo, Beijing, Durban, etc. and to which most governments have made a

commitment in their ratification of CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women).

Regarding the rule of law, a good place to begin would be for governments to repeal all laws and practices that discriminate against women, such as those in areas like land, property and inheritance rights. Women's groups have provided many such specific suggestions for the Outcome Document for this summit and we hope that governments will incorporate these in their negotiations and national statements.

The question to be asked of governments is when will they get serious about committing resources and political will to the advancement of the human rights of women?

If not at the Summit of 2005 – when?

HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE UN SYSTEM

I turn now to human rights reforms proposed in relation to the UN System and what impact they have on women's human rights:

Upgrading the status of human rights in the UN is welcome and long overdue. We support strengthening the OHCHR with more resources from the regular budget, but note that this should also include greater attention to gender mainstreaming throughout its operations.

Further, there is an urgent need to elevate the status and to increase the resources allotted to the women-specific entities in the UN system. These units are tasked with providing technical support to gender mainstreaming as well as advancing women's empowerment – yet they are woefully under-resourced and marginalized.

Regarding Treaty Body reform, any streamlining of the reporting done to these bodies must preserve the requirement of addressing human rights with great specificity so that issues such as abuses based on gender, race, and age, as well as socio-economic rights do not get sidelined by a bias toward civil and political rights.

For us, the question is not so much whether there should be a new Human Rights Council or a reformed Commission on Human Rights, but what can be done to ensure that these bodies operate in a way that most advances all human rights for all people. It is vital that a Council or CHR addresses the full range

of human rights issues including women's rights and socio-economic rights. Any human rights body must never be allowed to create a rights hierarchy or to further discriminate by putting aside action on the human rights of some, in the name of attending to "the most egregious" violations.

There are many positive aspects of the CHR that have been effective and should be kept or improved if a Council is created, such as:

- Special Procedures, such as the Special Rapporteurs and Working Groups, have often proved effective in developing and interpreting human rights as they apply to marginalized groups – around gender, sexual rights, racial minorities as well as in relation to social and economic rights. For the UN to remain an arena where human rights standards evolve, the work of these special mechanisms must be strengthened and their independence assured.
- Civil Society access and interaction with governments at the CHR has been extensive and beneficial. It should be strengthened in a Council as well as throughout the UN system, and especially with regard to the proceedings of the General Assembly.

Civil society – including women's NGOS - must be included in the Summit itself as well as in the processes of working out details about the proposed human rights council and human rights reform, in the next stages of work on the MDGs, and the peace building commission as plans develop after the Summit.

Women's rights advocates are a vibrant part of civil society and are significant supporters of the UN. But it is time that our issues are no longer marginalized and that governments recognize that gender equality is central to freedom to live in dignity and to the pursuit of human rights, security, and development in the 21st century.