



# NUMUN

**Northwestern University Model United Nations**

SOCHUM

Topic A: Empowering Women through Gender

Equality in Developing Nations

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8 April 2010



# Empowering Women through Gender Equality in Developing Nations

**“Today we are on the threshold of a new era of recognition and action with regard to the centrality of gender equality and women’s empowerment to development, equality, and peace.”** --Ines Alberdi, Executive Director, UNIFEM.

## Introduction

Though many international agreements champion women’s rights, the equality gap between men and women in developing nations remains large. Internationally, women are much less likely to be educated, employed, and insured than men, and they are much more likely to be in poverty (UNFPA). Woman trafficking is increasing, as well as violence against refugees and other marginalized women (PRB). Many women in underdeveloped countries die because they do not have proper access to information and services which help protect reproductive health. “Failure to provide information...to help women protect their reproduction health therefore constitutes gender-based discrimination and a violation of women’s rights to health and life,” according to the United Nations Populations Fund, and the dissemination of material on birth control and the spread of HIV is crucial in the developing world. Likewise, widespread education in general for women is important; there is a strong inverse correlation between women’s education levels and child mortality rates, and education for girls has proven to be an effective way to reduce poverty in developed and underdeveloped countries (PRB). In addition, women continue to experience legal inequality to men. Laws in many developing countries do not prohibit domestic violence, protect women’s property rights, or ensure anything approaching equal employment opportunities for



women (PRB). Throughout the world, women holding upper-level government positions are still an unfortunate rarity.

## Background

### **International Women's Day**

International Women's Day was first held on 8 March 1913, just before the start of the First World War. It was initially part of a campaign for peace observed by Russian women, but has grown into a global event that is celebrated around the world. In 1975, the United Nations officially recognized 8 March as International Women's Day. Every year since then, the day has been marked by a speech from the Secretary General. Thousands of events are held throughout the world on International Women's Day each year (International Women's Day 2010), and the day is now an official holiday in China, Armenia, Russia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, Moldova, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.

### **Commission on the Status of Women**

During the U.N.'s first year of existence, it created the Commission on the Status of Women, a policy-making body that aims to advance women's situations. One of its first actions was to make sure that gender-neutral language was used in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognizes "the inherent dignity...of all members of the human family." From the time of its creation, the commission has worked closely with NGOs; on average, between 30 and 50 NGOs attended Commission meetings in the 1950s. The commission has also worked closely with human rights groups such as UNESCO and UNICEF.



During the 1960s and 1970s, the United Nations began to expand to include many underdeveloped countries, and it was at this time that women's issues in the developing world became one of the major focuses of the Commission. Today, the Commission works on issues ranging from feminized poverty to gender-based violence.

### **International Women's Year**

In 1975, the year that the United Nations deemed International Women's Year, the UN held its first world conference on women's issues. Held in Mexico City, the conference promoted research about women's rights and established the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). The conference also named 1976-1985 the United Nations Decade for Women. Since this conference, 3 other world conferences on women have been held, in Copenhagen, Nairobi, and Beijing.

### **UNIFEM**

Created at the United Nations first women's conference, UNIFEM is a women's fund that gives economic support to projects and programs that further women's causes. The fund works "on the premise that it is the fundamental right of every woman to live a life free from discrimination and violence" (UNIFEM). The Fund's mission is to enhance women's economic situations, end gender-based violence, reduce the spread of HIV and AIDS in women, and advance gender justice. This mission is framed by two important international agreements: the Beijing Platform for Action and the Women's Bill of Rights. Active all over the world, UNIFEM works with national governments to promote the drafting of laws that support gender equality. Though the fund is



headquartered in New York, it has liaison offices in Belgium, Japan, Spain, and Ethiopia, and it has 15 sub-regional offices throughout the world (UNIFEM).

### **International Bill of Rights for Women**

Two international agreements form what is known as the International Bill of Rights for Women: the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

#### The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

Drafted in 1979 in New York City, the Convention establishes that it is illegal to discriminate based on gender. According to the Convention, discrimination against women is "... any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field." The Convention describes ways to put a stop to this discrimination through laws, policies, and programs (United Nations Cyberschoolbus). In addition, this treaty is the only one that affirms women's reproductive rights.

#### Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

This treaty was drafted in 1999, also in New York City. It allows groups of people to make inquiries directly to the Committee about violations of women's rights, and it allows people to petition to the Committee when they have run out of resources to remedy violations.



This Protocol functions as an optional addition to the The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and not all countries party to the Convention are also party to the Protocol.

### **Beijing Platform for Action**

A result of The Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action addresses 12 important women's issues: women in poverty, women and education, the girl-child, women and health, violence against women, women and armed conflict, women and the economy, women in power and decision making, institutional mechanisms for the development of women, human rights for women, women and the media, and women and the environment. The platform was reviewed in 2000; it was decided that some progress had been made, but the goals had not been met. The platform will be reviewed again in March 2010.

### Current Status

### **Major Issues**

#### Education

Women face systematic discrimination in the education system, and in nearly every country in the world, women receive less formal education than men do. In many regions of the world, Western Africa in particular, girls regularly fail to complete primary school; worldwide, of the children who are not enrolled in primary school, 70% are girls (ICPD). For this reason, one out of three primary schools in underdeveloped countries has not achieved gender parity (MDGR). In addition, women's literacy rates are lower than men's in most developing countries. In fact, 640



million women are illiterate (ICPD). This number constitutes two thirds of all the people who are illiterate.

Education disparities have to be challenged because better education for women will allow them to lead more autonomous and empowered lives. Higher education for women will allow them to hold higher paying, safer jobs, and it will allow them to compete better with men in the workforce. In addition, education affects women's reproductive health because women with higher education are likely to get married later and have smaller, healthier families.

### Equality in Economic and Political Sphere

On average, women worldwide work longer days than men but receive less pay (UNFPA). Women are more likely to be in poverty than men, and they are more likely to accept degrading work when in poverty. In developing countries, approximately two thirds of women hold vulnerable jobs. That women do more unpaid household duties also hurts their economic status. "By the time girls and boys become adults, females generally work longer hours than males, have less experience in the labour force, earn less income and have less leisure, recreation or rest time," according to the United Nations Population Fund. This trend leads parents to educate their sons over their daughters, which in turn perpetuates the inequality between men and women in the work force.

At the government level, too, women experience inequality. Women are less represented in government than men in every country. In 2008, 13 countries had no women at all in government (MDGR). Around the world, women are outnumbered by men in legislatures by 4 to 1 (UNIFEM). This is a problem because governments with more women in them are more likely to focus on women's issues; women need to be in government to affect policy towards women.



## Reproductive Health and HIV

“Gender inequality and violations of women’s rights make women and girls particularly susceptible, leaving them with less control than men over their bodies and their lives,” according to UNIFEM. For women between the ages of 15 and 44, reproductive health conditions are the leading cause of death, and complications during pregnancy are the leading cause of disability among women in developing countries (UNFPA). This is particularly tragic because a child’s life can be devastated without the protection of its mother.

It is crucial that women in underdeveloped and developing countries receive better access to family planning services. Lack of access to these services leads to unwanted pregnancies; one in ten pregnancies ends in an unsafe abortion, and there are 19 million unsafe abortions annually. In addition, infant survival rates are closely tied to maternal reproductive health. Four million babies die in the first four weeks of life each year, often because their mothers were unhealthy (UNFPA).

Institutionalized gender inequality is manifest in the realm of HIV education as well; in general, women have less information about the virus than men do, so they are less able to take the proper precautions. Women are often exposed to the high-risk sexual behaviors of their partners, which increases the chances of spreading HIV. More than 15 million women are afflicted by the virus, and that number continues to grow (UNIFEM). In many areas, women with HIV are stigmatized and, in some cases, kicked out of their homes.

## Violence and Sex Trafficking

Violence against women has many faces: domestic violence, sexual violence, “honor killings,” and genocide, to name a few. Gender-based violence is a major cause of death for women between the ages of 16 and 44. Pregnant women are at particular risk from gender-based violence



because many husbands become more violent while their wives are pregnant (UNFPA). Three out of five women are abused physically or sexually at some point in their lives, and studies link violence against women to the spread of HIV (UNIFEM). Women are most often abused by someone they know, such as their husband or a male family member. For this reason, gender-based violence often perpetuates male domination in the family unit.

In some regions, young girls are subject to bodily mutilation, such as female circumcision. Such practices can leave girls disabled and traumatized; approximately 140 million females live with the consequences of genital mutilation (WHO). These procedures can cause intense bleeding, child birth complication, life-long pain, and death. However, the practice is closely linked with tradition and religious belief in many communities in the developing world, particularly in Africa. In these communities, community members may shun women who are not circumcised.

Because many societies still treat women as property to be owned by men, sex trafficking remains a serious problem. Between 700,000 and 2 million women are trafficked annually (UNFPA). Traffickers typically target poor areas to find their victims; many traffickers trick women into believing that a better job awaits them in a different country, when in fact the traffickers are selling these women into sexual slavery. An estimated 50,000 women are brought to the United States by traffickers each year under false pretenses. In part, this happens because legislation does not go far enough to address the problem (UNFPA).

## **Current Efforts**

### Millennium Development Goals

In 2000, United Nations leaders met in New York to draft a United Nations Millennium Declaration. This declaration, which later became known as the Millennium Development Goals,



committed its adopters to work towards ten important and bold goals by 2015. One of the goals is to eliminate gender disparity at all levels of education. A counterpart of this goal was to eliminate the disparity between boys and girl at the primary and secondary levels of education by 2005. However, this goal was not met in time, and much progress remains to be made.

#### UN trust fund to end violence against women

The UN Trust Fund in Support of Actions to Eliminate Violence against Women was founded in 1996 and is managed by UNIFEM. Since it was created, the fund has supported 304 initiatives for women in 121 countries. Grantees have included governmental and non-governmental organizations, youth groups and networks, human rights organizations, and research organizations.

In 2009, the fund awarded approximately \$11 million to 13 projects, providing support for 18 different countries. These grants were extremely competitive, as 1,643 projects applied for funding.

#### Fund for Gender Equality

The newly-created Fund for Gender Equality is a \$68 million initiative, bankrolled by the governments of Spain and Norway, that works to empower women in the economic and political realms. In January 2010, it made its first allocation of \$9 million to 27 projects in 26 countries. Among other goals, the fund aims to increase the power of women's voices in the political sphere, allow for women who are HIV-positive to have more economic independence, and change attitudes towards women's involvement in the workforce.



### Celebrity advocates

Actress Nicole Kidman is one of UNIFEM's Goodwill Ambassadors as of 2006. Celebrities like Ms. Kidman put a spotlight on women's issues when they get involved because they have a large fan base. Ms. Kidman visits initiatives throughout the world that are supported by UNIFEM and brings the press with her. "[Ms. Kidman's] role is to raise awareness of the pressing issues that women face around the world and to amplify the message that the contribution of women is essential to development, to the building of just and peaceful societies," UNIFEM Executive Director Noeleen Heyzer said.

### Women and climate change

"Women are on the front lines of climate change — often the first to face its impacts on their livelihoods and very lives," according to UNIFEM. For this reason, women are in the position to initiate positive change in environmental care. The Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) was started in 1990 with the understanding that women's livelihoods, in underdeveloped countries especially, often depend upon their environment. For this reason, founders Bella Abzug and Mim Kelber decided that an effective way to bring women into the economy was to get them working on the environment. WEDO conducts research to create policies that support women's rights and the environment.

In 2006, WEDO was honored with the Champion of the Earth Award, and has recently partnered with UNIFEM to promote gender considerations in new climate agreements.



## Bloc Positions

### **Africa**

Human rights for women is a major issue in Africa. African countries aim to increase the number of women in government and leadership positions, educate women about reproductive health and the spread of HIV and AIDS, and reduce poverty and violence against women.

Representatives from the governments in Burundi, Cape Verde, Liberia, and Rwanda met with UNIFEM in 2008 to discuss how women's rights could be better protected by national policies.

### **Latin America**

Latin American countries are working to give women a legal status equal to that of men. They wish to strengthen the institutions which protect women's economic and property rights, and are also focusing on creating equal job opportunities for men and women and increasing women's access to healthcare. This includes working to reduce the spread of HIV and AIDS.

Ecuador's 2008-drafted constitution is more inclusive towards women, and the recently passed Law of Popular Participation in Bolivia allows women to get involved in government at the local level (UNIFEM).

### **The Middle East**

Women's rights is a contentious issue in this region. Some countries are working to reduce feminized poverty and the exclusion of women in the government. In Jordan, for example, the government has created a committee that reviews the situation of female workers and provides help. In Egypt, a Forum for Women Members of Parliament was created.



However, in other Middle Eastern countries, the governments continue to oppose increased women's rights. For example, women still cannot vote in Saudi Arabia, and in the United Arab Emirates and Lebanon they enjoy only partial suffrage. Religious extremism is often cited as a reason for the divide between men and women in the Middle East; in Arab states, just 28% of women are in the workforce (UNIFEM).

## **Asia**

Asian countries are working to reduce the disproportionate number of females in poverty. In particular, they are focusing on the protection and safety of female migrant workers. Human sex trafficking has also become a major concern in Asia; approximately 200,000 to 225,000 women and children are trafficked each year in Southeast Asia (Derk).

## **Central and Eastern Europe**

European countries are working to equalize men and women in the economic realm. They seek more complete ownership and land rights for women. In addition, they are pushing for women to become more actively involved in politics and in government. European countries recognize that women can play an important part in peace-building throughout the world and that governments' budgets need to be more inclusive of women's needs (UNIFEM).



### Questions to Consider

1. Does my country want to expand its policies to further include women?
2. Does my country wish to increase women's role in the government?
3. How can women's reproductive health be better protected?
4. Why do economic disparities between men and women persist?
5. How do high poverty levels relate to low female literacy rates?
6. What role does education play in equalizing women?
7. How are sex trafficking and violence towards women to be stopped?
8. How is women's involvement in championing environmental stewardship helpful to their cause?

### Recommended Sources

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/womens-rights>

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<http://www.amnestyusa.org/violence-against-women/page.do?id=1011012>

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<http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/women/>

<http://www.un.org/en/development/progareas/women.shtml>

<http://www.prb.org/Search.aspx?q=women>

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