

Opening Statement
by
Mr. Vladimir Petrovsky
Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva
At the commemoration of International Women's Day

March 8, 1999
Palais des Nations, Room VII, @ 12:00

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to welcome all of you here to commemorate International Women's Day. We have come together this afternoon to celebrate the great strides made by the international community towards ensuring the equal rights of one half of humanity and to acknowledge the task still ahead- if we are to make the enjoyment of all rights for all women a reality.

The United Nations strongly supports and has always been committed to the promotion and the protection of equal rights for women.. From the UN Charter, the first international agreement to proclaim gender equality as a fundamental human right, to the inclusion of provisions relating to women's human rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Organization has never ceased in its efforts to advance the status of women worldwide and to imagine a different future for women and men, in a society based on equality and mutual respect.

The legal instruments available to us in this endeavor are continually increasing. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well as other human rights treaties, and more recent resolutions such as those relating to the trafficking in women and girls, all contribute to our goal of enabling women to fully realize all of their rights and their potential as human beings.

The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, (“CEDAW”) is the prime practical tool in this regard. Adopted by the General Assembly 20 years ago, in 1979, this Treaty entered into force in 1981 and has been acceded or succeeded to or ratified by 163 States parties, and signed by others. It sets both legally binding obligations for States parties and the international standard for what is meant by equality between women and men. Furthermore, it demands not only equal rights for women, but also that they should be able to enjoy these rights on an equal footing with men. Thus requiring that other than legal obstacles be recognized and eliminated. “Equality of result” is clearly much more difficult to obtain and reality often lags behind the law.

The Convention seeks to eradicate all discrimination against women in the political, social, cultural and economic realms through equal rights in family law, and demands that female models of working and living become equally respected. In other words, that standards or prejudicial cultural traditions or practices which serve to deprive women from the attainment of their full exercise of citizenship, freedom and rights, be changed.

Finally, the Convention has laid the legal ground for three of the four UN Women’s Conferences which have served to greatly strengthen the international women’s movement. In particular, The Beijing Platform For Action, adopted in 1995, the definitive “agenda for women’s empowerment” is directly linked to this document.

New and emerging issues such as adaptation to globalization and economic restructuring have resulted in adverse economic consequences to women in regards to health and employment among other areas and hampered women’s advancement. The “feminization

of poverty” appears to be deepening. In recognition of the rising world-wide poverty among women and the fact that women are more likely to suffer financially in the event of divorce, the Secretary-General announced last Thursday that the UN would begin withholding the wages of spouses in default of family support payments. The Secretary General also stated that: “The ideal of gender equality, to which we have so long aspired, is still far from a reality. High on our agenda must be the completion of the structure of international legal protection. The completion of the legal framework for equality must be complemented by the creation of an enabling environment to secure de facto equality for women.”

The UN firmly believes that de facto equality or “equality of result” begins within the Organization and as such continues to strive towards a greater awareness of gender within the Secretariat. Managers are much more aware of the importance of gender issues and the last meeting of the Senior Management Group on March 3, reviewed the progress made towards the achievement of greater gender equality. In December 1998, the General Assembly reaffirmed the goal of 50/50 overall gender distribution by the year 2000. In 1998 women in the UN Secretariat held a total of 893 or 37.1% of professional (including top managerial) positions overall. Gender training to foster an increased awareness of gender issues and to develop and maintain a gender sensitive work environment is also envisaged within the New Special Measures for the Achievement of Gender Equality.

Here at the United Nations Office at Geneva, we are strongly committed to the advancement and the promotion of women and are proud to count a growing number of highly qualified senior female officials including the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, the High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata, and the Director-General of

the World Health Organization, Gro Brundtland, among us. In this context, I would also like to welcome and congratulate Ms. Danuta Hubner, Deputy Executive Secretary for the ECE and our newly appointed Focal Point For Women, who joined us in these capacities as of the 1 January, this year. At the same time, I would also like to thank Ms. Dunja Pastizzi- Ferencic who relinquished those duties last year and Ms. Nahla Haidar. Lastly, I would like to pay tribute to all the Permanent Representatives who are women, some of whom are present today, to all of my own women colleagues as well as all the women in the NGO community who have contributed in an outstanding fashion.

Today's theme: "Women and Health" touches upon issues of the gravest concern to us. Legal reforms are urgently needed to curtail all forms of violence and appalling abuses which are still being committed against women and the girl child. The inhumane practices of rape as a weapon of war, trafficking in women and children and traditional practices which adversely effect the health of women and girls, as well as domestic and other forms of violence specifically directed against women are, at long last, being scrutinized and condemned by the international community.

Issues such as unequal access to health care are often the result of specific government restrictions in the health sector, or the certain countries' legislation which requires the full segregation of health services, putting women's health at severe risk. These issues must be addressed and countered. Female genital mutilation, to which an estimated 2 million women and girls are victim every year, continues to claim women's lives, not to mention the high infant and maternal mortality rates due particularly to the absence of safe and legal abortions and education.

However, although the picture is quite bleak, advances have been made. The world's legal treatment of rape and sexual violence has been advanced through the establishment of War Crime's Tribunals and the inclusion of rape as constituting genocide in several convictions pronounced by the Rwandan as well as the Tribunal in the Former Yugoslavia has increased and altered awareness of this type of violence.

In conclusion, let me emphasize that we must focus our attention on an international agenda for the new millennium, placing priority on those issues that will ensure dignity and respect for all members of society, and work to abolish conditions that deprive one group of people from the attaining their full rights. Let us recognize that ensuring human rights for all is the work of each individual- the personal is the political- showing that there is perhaps a clear connection between a lack of democracy in the family and a lack of democracy in the nation. There can be no democracy if the voices of half of the population are not heard. Let us recall the words of the Universal Declaration, that the recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family, is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, And Finally, let us work together to make this new millennium one of true equality for all.

Thank you for your attention.