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## Substantive session of 2011

Coordination segment

### Provisional summary record of the 28th meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Wednesday, 13 July 2011, at 3 p.m.

*President:* Mr. Momen (Vice-President)..... (Bangladesh)

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*Panel discussion II on “Countering gender discrimination and negative Gender stereotypes: effective policy responses”*

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*The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.*

**The role of the United Nations system in implementing the ministerial declaration of the high-level segment of the 2010 substantive session of the Economic and Social Council (E/2011/85) (continued)**

**Coordination, programme and other questions: Mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programmes in the United Nations system (E/2011/114) (continued)**

*Panel discussion II on "Countering gender discrimination and negative gender stereotypes: effective policy responses"*

1. **The President** noted that gender stereotypes, which were present in many parts of society, were the root cause of discrimination at school, at work and in society at large and must be eliminated systematically. The proper education of society was essential if discrimination against women was genuinely to be eliminated; it was necessary, therefore, to raise awareness of the problem already at the primary school level.

2. The obstacles varied from one region to another: in Africa and South Asia, women were under-represented in higher education; in Europe, they were more educated than men but were at a disadvantage with regard to employment. Barriers in the workplace were more obvious in the areas of science and technology. Women were less well represented in academia and the public sector and in research and development. In general, men tended to be associated with mathematics and science and women with the humanities and care for people. Governments knew they could not continue to grow and thrive without the full involvement of half the population and should provide equal opportunities for all by eliminating discriminatory legal provisions from electoral, criminal and family codes.

3. **Ms. Puri** (UN Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women - UN Women) pointed out that stereotypes were socially constructed and based on standards, practices and religious and cultural beliefs. Often rigid, they could nevertheless be induced to evolve. Such stereotypes needed to be identified, so as to counter and eliminate them at all levels given their negative effects: wage gaps, occupational segregation,

the "glass ceiling", as well as the feminization of poverty and violence in all areas of life, which were responsible for direct and indirect discrimination and affected de jure and de facto enjoyment of human rights.

4. The action required covered all areas and levels: language, word choice, laws and practices, education, the media and the world of work. What was involved was a veritable cosmography of gender inequality. Measures could include the adoption of temporary special measures or quotas, consultations with religious circles and leaders, the implementation of educational policies, a discussion in the media of the representation of women, as well as amendments to the laws so as to change the perception of what was right and what was not. The recommendations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women offered a valuable normative framework and guidelines in that regard. For its part, UN Women was committed to supporting the efforts of Member States, in terms of awareness, knowledge transfer and strategic cooperation, and to providing technical services and advice as needed.

5. **Ms. Yasmin** (Bangladesh), speaking in her capacity as a member of parliament, said that women accounted for nearly half of the population of Bangladesh. Despite progress in the socio-economic sphere and the provisions ensuring gender equality in the Constitution, discrimination based on sex and gender stereotypes persisted in the country, as elsewhere. The Government was aware that education was the most effective weapon in the fight against gender inequality and had developed an education policy that focused specifically on girls and women; it had also adopted the goals of Education for All. In addition, a bill had been submitted to Parliament on the adoption of a comprehensive policy to advance women. Many steps had been taken to ensure girls' access to primary education; over 56 per cent of girls in the areas covered by the policy were enrolled in secondary schools, and scholarships and financial aid were available for women in higher education. Throughout the country, and especially in rural areas, an increasing number of awareness campaigns were being conducted with the participation of women who had completed their studies and were active on the professional level. Bangladesh had obtained excellent results in that effort: the presence of women in political life had increased over the past decade; in the 15 to 24 year-old age group girls had a higher literacy rate than boys; women held important

positions in Government, including the posts of Prime Minister, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Internal Affairs; and the presence of women in traditionally male occupations had grown.

6. **Ms. Coker-Appiah** (Gender Studies and Human Rights Documentation Centre, Ghana) said that in Ghana much remained to be done in certain areas: while parity had been achieved in primary education, that was not true of secondary and higher education. Politics was also still considered a male domain, but thanks to awareness campaigns and the acquisition by women of economic independence, the presence of women in politics should increase.

7. Turning to another area, she noted that culture and religion were mutually reinforcing and that it was difficult to determine which had been the source of a given practice. The foundational texts of the three major religions of the Book, whose drafting had been influenced by the social and cultural context of the time and whose interpretations and reinterpretations were also marked by the social, cultural, political and legal context, affirmed that religion and culture were mutually reinforcing. In order to achieve progress it was necessary to promote and exploit progressive reinterpretations, revise the legal apparatus and let oneself be guided by the recommendations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, particularly those relating to the Sharia, which were very relevant in that area.

8. **Ms. Connors** (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) said that stereotypes were the result of categorizing people into specific groups or types with general characteristics or features or roles based solely on their apparent membership in a particular group. That amounted to denying a person his or her fundamental rights and freedoms. Although stereotypes affected both women and men, they often had a disproportionately negative effect on women. They might also lead to discrimination or perpetuate inequality or subordinate status. She recalled two recent cases that were instructive in that regard: the case of Konstantin Markin, the father of three children, who had been serving in the armed forces and who had appealed before the European Court of Human Rights against discrimination on the part of the authorities, which had denied him parental leave; and that of Karen Vertido, who had been raped by a businessman and had appealed the local court's decision to acquit the perpetrator to the Committee on the Elimination of

Discrimination against Women, which had concluded that the judge's decision had been based on myths and misconceptions about rape and rape victims.

9. Many seemed to believe that, once discrimination against women was eliminated, gender stereotypes would instantly disappear. The history of the emancipation of women showed, however, that those stereotypes, especially those related to family life and child care, were remarkably persistent, because they played a key role in the construction of the identity of the person or social group and were deeply rooted in norms, language, images, values and practices. Those behavioural patterns needed, therefore, to be changed. In its body of concluding observations, general recommendations and decisions, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women had set out the measures to be taken to that end, and the Commission on the Status of Women had recently emphasized the importance of training teachers and designing curricula that were sensitive to gender equality. However, although there was no shortage of recommendations, implementation was lacking. That responsibility lay primarily with the State, but civil society also had a key role to play, at both the national and the international levels. In addition, further research was needed on the impact of gender stereotypes and their perpetuation; the key to the solution of the problem rested, however, in the hands of everyone, women, men, girls and boys.

10. **Ms. Cook** (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development) said that awareness campaigns could be effective in the fight against gender stereotypes, but that other measures might be necessary in order to change the deep structures in which the persistent forms of discrimination against and exclusion of women were embedded. Over the past fifty years, the situation of women had improved dramatically in many countries. That was due in part to the feminist movement, which had made women aware of their rights, but also to concomitant changes in legislation, anti-discrimination laws and other mechanisms for equality and the protection of rights, which had enabled women to actively defend their rights and seek the protection of the law against violations. Some progressive countries had gone even further by, for example, having the social security system compensate women for their reproductive role, including family leave, or by restructuring pension systems.

11. Many of the barriers to equality persisted, however. The demand for equality was challenging belief systems and power structures, which those in charge were not willing to give up easily - hence the fact that awareness campaigns alone might be insufficient. But there were other forms of discrimination that were so deeply rooted in political, social and economic life that they became barely perceptible. That could be seen, for example, in how the economy was conceptualized. Using the gross domestic product (GDP) as the main measure of growth or poverty, and by extension well-being, basically amounted to measuring only economic goods and services traded in the market. Women's daily work was not given any value by decision-makers and became invisible, both socially and domestically. But the economy could not function without that work: in order to provide economically productive work the individual must be educated, fed and taken care of. Employers, the economy and the market benefited from such work, but increasingly households had to bear the cost. Moreover, that was often one of the main obstacles to women's access to resources and the labour market, especially more formal forms of employment, and to strengthening the position of women within the household. Such a limited view of the economy and economic activity needed to be broadened so as to include the economy of reproduction, which covered much of the work done by women. That would require, for example, finding ways to value and reward the work related to home care, on the part of women or men, or to increase spending and social investments that supported women in their reproductive role, while allowing them also to participate in employment, business or public life, e.g. child care, assistance for health and education, better transportation, and so forth. In terms of policies, solutions aimed at socializing the costs related to women's reproductive role by shifting them from households to the society through the public provision of certain goods and services could lead to significant progress in low-income countries, in terms of establishing some minimum social protection that was fair to both sexes.

12. **Ms. Hodges** (International Labour Organization) said that she wished to review some of the measures adopted to combat gender stereotypes at work. Theoretical work and several decades of International Labour Organization (ILO) experience had shown the need to involve all major stakeholders in changes aimed at overcoming negative stereotypes. With its tripartite structure, ILO involved not only representatives of

ministries of labour and employment, but also representatives of employees and businesses. It sought also to work with representatives of other ministries - as was the case during the campaign to eliminate child labour - and with representatives of national institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). For example, a recent ILO project in Ukraine entitled "Gender equality in the world of work", carried out with the European Union (EU), had had profound effects on public institutions, social partners and governmental authorities and on women entrepreneurs. In addition to various important legislative and institutional reforms, the project had enabled many women to engage in self-employment.

13. The activities of ILO were based on a body of international labour standards, which gave it a clear mandate to provide guidance and act operationally. In particular, the Convention concerning Equal Remuneration for Men and Women Workers for Work of Equal Value (Convention No. 100) and the Convention concerning Discrimination in Respect of Employment and Occupation (Convention No. 111), which had been ratified by many countries, provided a clear and predictable legal framework for ILO action to promote equality between the sexes. Those instruments focused on the elimination of stereotypes that hindered the free choice of one's occupation and the equal treatment of women and men in the world of work. In that regard, ILO had conducted a project in Jordan in which the tripartite partners had agreed to develop a guide on gender-neutral job evaluation and the Jordanian Government would seek to include pay equity in its 2011-2015 national strategy for women. In addition, ILO worked tirelessly with the entire United Nations system to achieve the goal of gender equality, in accordance with the mandate of each organization; a recent example of that collaboration had been the signing of a memorandum of understanding with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (UN Women) on 13 June 2011.

14. She also pointed out that ILO had identified many factors that contributed to programme success, such as the adoption of a holistic approach - as advocated in the Ministerial Declaration of the 2010 high-level segment of the Economic and Social Council, which had called for "integrated, comprehensive, multisectoral and gender-responsive approaches to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals",

the organization of awareness and prevention campaigns, improving the protection afforded by the law and training in human rights, strengthening the application by the judiciary and the system as a whole of principles aimed at eliminating stereotypes, and, finally, improving the mechanisms of redress available to victims. Affirmative action, when it was implemented according to specific rules, also provided very conclusive results, as demonstrated by examples of good practice that had been imitated throughout the world, in particular a Norwegian programme to promote gender equality at work that had inspired a similar initiative in Uganda. Finally, measures to balance family and professional life were of primary importance in efforts to advance equality.

15. It was also essential to involve men and boys in efforts to eliminate negative stereotypes of women, through training and awareness campaigns at the workplace. A programme to sensitize men to the problem of violence against women had been held in India and had been successful, as had a recent initiative in the Pacific Islands, which had helped to focus on the role of men in reproductive health.

16. Her organization applied the principles it preached, in accordance with its 2008 Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization, in seeking to promote and measure gender equality within the framework of social protection and workers' rights at all levels. But it was undeniable that, in order to continue its work, ILO would need financial resources.

17. **Mr. Iliopoulos** (Hungary), speaking on behalf of the European Union (EU), said that equality between men and women was a fundamental right and a common value for member States of the European Union. A comprehensive legal framework had been established to ensure respect for that principle and fight against discrimination. However, statistics showed large differences in pay between men and women, and one could see that women's capacities were underutilized. In order to fight against gender stereotypes and the tendency to restrict women to certain roles, it was necessary to address such issues in school curricula, develop targeted programmes and policies, and cooperate with civil society, the private sector and social partners.

18. In 2010, the EU had adopted a new five-year strategy to promote equality between men and women, which was based on several components: promoting

women's economic independence and equality in decision-making, and combatting wage disparities and violence against women. Among other measures he noted the European Pact for gender equality for the period 2010-2011, adopted by the Council of the European Union in March 2011, the designation of a European Equal Pay Day and the establishment of a European Institute for Gender Equality.

19. Since 2008, the European Union had implemented the EU Guidelines on violence against women and girls and combating all forms of discrimination against them. The Union approached development cooperation from a gender equality perspective and welcomed in that regard the establishment of UN Women. In the field of health, it welcomed the establishment of the World Health Organization Commission on Information and Accountability for Women's and Children's Health and fully supported the objectives of the UNAIDS Agenda for Accelerated Country Action for Women, Girls and Gender Equality and HIV.

20. He asked the panellists how to improve data collection and the analysis of factors leading to discrimination against women in order to better target policies and how to better involve men in the fight against discrimination and against the stereotyping of women.

21. **Mr. Goltyaev** (Russian Federation) said that, despite the progress made in the area of gender equality, the problem of discrimination against women remained a priority at the international level. The Russian Federation supported efforts to combat violence and discrimination against women and supported the Secretary-General's campaign entitled "Unite to End Violence against Women".

22. He asked the panellists how cooperation between the Economic and Social Council and UN Women could be ensured system-wide and how the Council contributed to the fight against discrimination against women.

23. **Ms. Booker** (Bahamas), noting that the panellists had been exclusively women, said that it might have been better to try for equal representation of the sexes, which would have allowed men to contribute to the discussions. In addition, women also contributed, in her view, to perpetuating stereotypes in society, and it was their responsibility to assist and support each other in order to change attitudes. Finally, she noted that the

discussions at the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women had been very rewarding, and it would have been useful to draw on the conclusions and reflections that had emerged during those discussions, so as to increase the scope of topics being examined.

24. **Mr. Tsoungui** (Cameroon) wished to acknowledge the support provided by UN Women to his country, which had facilitated the successful conclusion of a number of activities, including a gender-sensitive budgeting programme and the development of a national policy document on gender matters. The Ministry responsible for women's affairs had established a network of focal points in Government offices with responsibility for monitoring the protection and advancement of women. Cameroon had established a technical group on gender equality, consisting of representatives of key agencies of the United Nations system, which sought to promote concerted action to support the advancement of women. He asked Ms. Puri whether it was easy to combat discriminatory behaviour rooted in culture using only legislative means.

25. **Ms. Dutta** (India) said that women continued to face a patriarchal society that discriminated against them in many areas, including nutrition, education, employment, land rights and access to credit. The Indian Government was working to change the situation by adopting progressive policies that were based on affirmative action and designed to enable women to better participate in decision-making. Such policies focused in particular on women working in the informal sector with capacity-building initiatives that included improving their employability and training.

26. Educating girls and women played a decisive role in the advancement of women and the elimination of exploitation and in development. Measures to promote girls' education had increased enrolment and strengthened efforts to keep them in school, while taking better account of their needs. In 2009, the Government had launched a programme to universalize secondary education, and practical measures to eliminate stereotypes in textbooks and promote gender equality, including through the sensitization of teachers, had also been implemented. The number of girls receiving higher education had increased and there was greater diversification in the programmes of study chosen. The SABLA programme, which focused specifically on nutrition and adolescent health with a

view to strengthening empowerment, had been implemented in 2010 in 200 districts.

27. Thanks to a budget policy that took into account gender issues, promotional actions and other actions to promote and strengthen awareness and capacity-building had been implemented at all levels of Government policy. In the same vein, the National Mission for Women's Empowerment sought to promote the economic and social empowerment of women by ensuring the coordination of programmes implemented throughout the country with the participation of key stakeholders; emphasis was placed on efforts to combat violence against women and to promote respect for the law in that area. Violence against women was multifaceted and widespread and was being opposed by various means through policies and legislation aimed at assisting victims. Many laws had been adopted to improve the status of women in India, and they covered areas as diverse as trafficking, dowry-related problems, the prohibition of early marriages and sexual harassment at work. Progress on such issues required the changing of attitudes and raising awareness of the problem of violence against women, and women themselves should be encouraged to use the remedies available to enforce their rights. In that regard, the media, including television, radio, and the Internet, could be very useful.

28. **Ms. Puri** (UN Women), responding to the question posed by the representative of the European Union, said that the collection of disaggregated data was essential for the implementation of useful and targeted policies to combat discrimination against women. For example, it was useful to have statistics on the conviction rate for rape or the number of abortions motivated by the gender of the child in order to take appropriate action and to determine whether the laws enacted had had a concrete effect. UN Women based its work on benchmarks in order to take stock of the situation in a country, to appreciate the usefulness of programmes and legislation that had been adopted and to propose solutions.

29. Responding to the question posed by the representative of the Russian Federation concerning the relationship between UN Women and United Nations agencies with responsibility for gender equality, she said that the Commission on the Status of Women was the main intergovernmental body charged with developing policies and global standards on the issue. The Chairman of the Executive Board of UN Women was working to establish closer links between

the Commission on the Status of Women and UN Women's Board. The Board, for its part, was a very important organ of consultation and consensus-building on policies and standards on gender equality.

30. She said that she agreed completely with the observations made by the representative of the Bahamas on the issue of financing for development. It was essential in that regard to give priority to financing methods that took gender into account. Working in collaboration with Member States, UN Women continued to work to promote such methods of financing and the adoption of gender-sensitive approaches. She also agreed that it was largely up to women to fight against gender stereotypes, even if it was essential to involve men in that fight. Women should support each other and take care not to convey such stereotypes. She also indicated that, owing to a shortage of time, she could not report the conclusions of the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, but would make them available to participants.

31. Replying to the representative of Cameroon, she confirmed how difficult it was to fight against deep-rooted stereotypes, which were often linked to religious and cultural issues and the power relations between the sexes. The primary way to fight against such stereotypes was education and awareness. But that was only a first step, to which must be added the adoption of laws and special measures - including the imposition of quotas in various fields - in order to change practices that often protected entrenched interests. Efforts in that area might encounter mixed legal systems and religious systems that set rules that might not conform to international standards regarding the human rights of women.

32. Responding to comments made by the representative of India, she said that, although media campaigns aimed at changing the way women were viewed could be very effective, the media could also have a pernicious effect, because women were often represented as a commodity, creating new stereotypes. It was necessary to use the media wisely and take full advantage of significant opportunities offered by social networks, particularly in terms of mobilizing women in rural areas.

33. **Ms. Coker-Appiah** (Gender Studies and Human Rights Documentation Centre, Ghana), answering the question raised by the representative of the European Union on how to involve men and boys in the fight

against gender discrimination, said that in some countries, initiatives such as a men's movement to combat violence against women were successful. Mobilizing people, including respected men in the community, to send messages to other men dramatically changed how those messages were received.

34. The fight against gender stereotypes was particularly difficult in countries where customary laws were superimposed on the statutory law, as was the case in many African countries, especially given that most of the issues covered by the stereotypes were subject to customary rules. In such cases, the adoption of legislation could only serve as a first step, which must be completed by multiple advocacy actions targeting various audiences. It was important, in general, to implement long-term strategies aimed at gradually changing attitudes.

35. **Ms. Cook** (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development) pointed out that the behaviour of individuals was governed by institutions and social structures and the manner in which relationships in the society in which those individuals lived were shaped. Those factors needed to be understood, when studying gender issues, and taken into account, in particular in any determination of how to involve men and boys in the fight against sexism. In that connection, studies were needed on the image that men had of themselves in societies undergoing deindustrialization or where men could no longer find work. Such situations ran counter to the stereotype of men as the breadwinners and had an impact on how boys identified with their fathers and sometimes on academic performance.

36. On the issue of inequalities in health, she believed that it would be desirable to have more gender disaggregated data on the subject, and it was also necessary to consider how the available data were analysed and the appropriateness of the analytical frameworks used. She agreed that some inequalities, for example in access to health services, stemmed from discrimination against women, but stressed that there were also biological differences between men and women - they had different needs - and that certain inequalities could be derived from factors that had not been taken into account. It would be useful to study that issue.

37. As pointed out by the Indian delegation, the education of girls beyond the primary level was

critical. Studies on the subject had shown that the number of years of schooling had a direct impact on the age at which girls married and had children, on their health and that of their children and on their ability to care for their families. She also mentioned studies on housing that had been conducted in Asia showing a correlation between, on the one hand, women's access to housing and ownership of property and, on the other hand, a reduction in the number of cases of domestic violence, among other things. Having housing protected women, strengthened them socially and increased their ability to earn income. Finally, she said that the example of the recent revolts in Arab countries showed that social networks could be an extremely effective means of mobilizing and empowering women.

38. **Ms. Yasmin** (Bangladesh) said that governments often failed to achieve their gender equality goals, despite the programmes implemented and the laws adopted to that end. That was usually due to deeply rooted stereotypes, which were very difficult to overcome, as attitudes had not changed. Those stereotypes were formed at a very young age, which was why special attention should be given to early childhood education, including the training of teachers to teach children the concept of gender equality, to encourage children of both sexes to play and work together, and not to pass on preconceived ideas about the role assigned by society to each of the sexes. Religion could also play an important role, as was the case for example in Bangladesh, where many children attended religious schools with teachers who distorted religious teachings and gave them an erroneous interpretation, especially with regard to the role and place of women in society. It was important to give children accurate information, so that they understood that in fact all religions preached respect for women and that empowering women was beneficial for the family and for society as a whole.

39. **Ms. Hodges** (International Labour Organization) said that, in general, much progress had been made in the fight against gender stereotypes and in increasing awareness of the issue. However, the ground gained could be lost in times of crisis. It was important to remain vigilant and to persevere in the effort, even though situations might fluctuate and give rise to some discouragement.

40. **Ms. Connors** (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) pointed out that it

had been thirty years since the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women had begun its work, which showed how difficult it was to combat gender stereotypes. It was important to remain vigilant, as a resurgence of that type of stereotyping was always possible, as had been the case in Europe recently with regard to the stereotype of the housewife. It was important to show how gender stereotypes denied both men and women full enjoyment of their fundamental rights, as could be seen in the example cited earlier of the man whom the law had not allowed to take parental leave when his wife had wanted to return to work.

41. **The President**, responding to the comment made by the representative of the Bahamas, said the panel speakers were chosen for their expertise in the field under consideration and their availability. Sometimes there were more women than men, and sometimes vice versa. He took note, however, of the suggestion made by the delegation.

42. With regard to coordination between the Council and the other United Nations agencies concerned with gender equality issues, he said that consideration of the issue of the mainstreaming of gender issues in the policies and programmes of the United Nations system, which the Council was now engaged in, was an example of how the Council worked to promote and monitor the implementation of all decisions taken by mutual agreement and the resolutions of the General Assembly. Such an exercise allowed all parties involved to review the matter under consideration and to consult, and provided an opportunity for Member States to report on the progress achieved and to identify gaps at the level of the United Nations system. It should also be noted that institutions that were not part of the system, such as the Bretton Woods institutions, were invited to attend. In general, the Council sought to implement coordinated approaches to gender equality and organized meetings with the executive offices of all of the agencies concerned - in particular, UN Women, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) - in order to ensure the implementation of decisions and ministerial declarations that had been adopted.

*The meeting rose at 5.45 p.m.*