

Women's Leadership at the UN: 10 years after Beijing

by **Kyung-wha Kang**

Minister, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Korea to the UN

Introduction

I would like to sincerely thank the convener Dr. Chang Pilwha as well as the international coordination Dr. Soon-young Yoon for kindly inviting me to take part in the 9th Interdisciplinary Congress on Women (WW05). I am also honored to be among the speakers today, in the company of our moderator Prof. Cho Hyong and such distinguished panelists and rapporteur to discuss women's leadership.

A 10 year review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action was carried out at the 49th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in March this year. In light of its significance in the annals of UN efforts to advance women, I would like to give an overall account of the 49th CSW, and then discuss my observations about women's leadership at the UN, both in the Secretariat and in the inter-governmental deliberations.

Beijing+10: 49th session of the CSW

The 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 was the culmination of decades of UN efforts to advance women. The Conference produced the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, a comprehensive policy guideline that spelled out the actions required in twelve critical areas to empower women and achieve gender equality. In 2000, a five-year review of the implementation of the Platform for Action was carried out at a special session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, producing further policy recommendations. This year, a ten-year review and appraisal was carried out at the 49th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), held New York, February 28 to March 10.

By all accounts, the 49th CSW fully lived up to the expectation that had built up towards the 10th year anniversary of Beijing. The session was attended by over 1,800 government representatives, including 90 ministerial level officials - predominantly women but also a significant number of men in charge of gender equality issues in their national governments - and nearly 3,000 NGO representatives. In the formal meetings of government representatives, the two weeks were filled with high-level discussion on some timely issues in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. Outside the formal meetings, hundreds of side events were held, sponsored by governments and NGOs, in the form of seminars, launches of initiatives, performances, and celebrations. The International Women's Day was marked in a commemorative meeting, with speeches by women leaders who had headed the four world conferences on women and the special session, including Mrs. Mongella. The session adopted 10 resolutions tabled by individual countries. Most importantly, after some intense negotiations, the commission was able to adopt a short Declaration, which reaffirmed the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in clear, unqualified language.

The review and appraisal at the 49th CSW made clear that while much progress had been made during the past decade in implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, much more needed to be done for its full implementation. Based upon government responses to a detail questionnaire on implementation of Beijing, the report of the Secretary-General summed up the current situation as follows:

Over the past 10 years, the status and role of women has undergone significant change on a global scale although not at an equal pace in all regions. Generally speaking, there is significantly greater awareness of gender equality issues among governments and the public at large. The participation of women in public life increased, child and maternal mortality was reduced and access to education and literacy of women and girls improved worldwide. Governments increasingly address matters previously considered private, such as violence against women in all its forms. Trafficking is acknowledged as major global concern. Issues affecting growing numbers of women, such as HIV/AIDS are given greater attention. The situation of women with special needs and multiple disadvantages is increasingly being addressed. There is also a clear trend toward additional legislation to eliminate discrimination and promote gender equality. Over the past decade governments have repealed or revised discriminatory laws and increasingly recognized the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women as a critical framework for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. A large gap remains between policy and practice in promotion of gender equality. Public attitudes towards the advancement of women and gender equality have not changed at the same pace as policy, legal and institutional frameworks. Explicitly addressing persistent stereotypical attitudes and discriminatory practices is critical to the full implementation of the Platform for Action.

With so much work still left undone, it was vitally important for the 49th CSW to reaffirm the importance and relevance of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. In the lead-up to the 49th session, it was not all that certain that the Commission would be able to do so. The political landscape had changed over the past 10 years, and the solid consensus built around the Declaration and Platform for Action 10 years ago was in question. During the ten years of implementation, different countries had achieved different results, faced different challenges, and now had different priorities. Some countries wanted to highlight issues that were important to them, prompting others to do the same, and opening up the possibility of renegotiating the Beijing language and even backsliding on the Beijing commitments. In the end, however, with strong push coming from the NGO partners, all members were able to exercise the maximum spirit of cooperation, and adopt the Declaration that gave clear, unqualified reaffirmation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

Thus, the 49th CSW generated the momentum for the full and accelerated implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It is now up to governments, UN entities, NGOs and other stakeholders to translate the momentum into effective action. Furthermore, efforts must be made to ensure that gender issues are discussed not in isolation but in close step with the broader discussions taking place at the United Nations this year.

Generally speaking, in many countries and at the UN, gender equality is still a women's issue, and despite its formal adoption by governments and UN entities as a strategy to obtain gender equality, "gender mainstreaming" remains more a slogan than a set of concrete action. This year offers a valuable chance to close the gap between the concept and practice of gender mainstreaming at the UN. This is a historic year for the UN. It is the 60th anniversary of the UN, and the 5 year anniversary of the Millennium Summit (2000), and much discussion is taking place in NY and around the world on reform ideas with far-reaching consequences for how the global body works. The debate is building up towards September, when presidents and prime ministers of the world will come to the UN for a summit gathering, with a view to adopting an outcome that will define the work of the UN for many years to come. Security Council reform is just one of the many issues being discussed. Development assistance, in particular to achieve the development goals (MDGs) identified in the Millennium Declaration of 2000, establishing a peace-building commission of the UN in addition to its peace-keeping work, strengthening the UN mechanism for human rights, and management reform of the UN Secretariat are also high on the agenda.

It is disappointing but not surprising that very little on gender issues can be detected so far in the on-going debate on the UN reform issues, neither in statements made by governments nor in the report of the Secretary General entitled "In Larger Freedom: Towards Security, Development and Human Rights for All" which serves as the basis for the debate. The fact is that gender mainstreaming doesn't happen automatically. It is still an uphill battle, and government and UN entities have to be constantly reminded that the goal of gender equality, development and peace requires genuine and action-oriented commitment to incorporating the gender dimension into all areas and all policies and programs. In the process, women leaders inside governments and at the UN and other inter-governmental arenas, in close partnership with women NGO leaders, have vital roles to play.

Women's Leadership at the UN

Both as government representatives in inter-governmental deliberations at the UN and as staff members of the UN system, women are still under-represented and women's leadership remains the exception rather than the norm.

The Beijing Platform for Action called on the United Nations to achieve overall gender equality of staff in the professional and higher categories, with the goal of reaching the 50/50 gender balance at managerial and decision-making levels by the year 2000. Five years after the target year, the 50/50 goal still remains far from reality.

As of the end of 2004, women in professional and higher categories in the UN Secretariat represented 37.1% overall, an increase of a mere 1.6 percentage points since 1998 when data was first made available; 28.8% at the D-1 level and above, and increase of 7.6 percentage points since 1998; 22.4% at the Assistant Secretary-General level (10 women out of 45), an increase of 9.4 percentage points since 1998; and 17.5% at the Under Secretary-General level (7 women out of 40), an increase of 6.5 percentage points since 1998. Meanwhile, in the General Service and related categories in the Secretariat, women constitute the majority,

with 61.6%, which is an increase from 57.8% in 1995. Overall, the picture is one of slower than anticipated progress toward the 50/50 gender parity at the decision-making and leadership levels, with the preponderance of women in the non-professional lower levels. The significant gains made at senior levels (D-1 and above) are encouraging, as they can be seen as the result of political appointments reflecting the will of the Secretary-General and influential member states to place women in high-profile positions. However, the minimal increase at the P levels from which future managers would emerge, is a cause for concern. More concerted efforts are required to ensure that the 50/50 goal is achieved, at all levels and at senior levels in particular.

There is also a need for stronger guidance and leadership from member states. The 50th CSW next year in March will take up the issue of women's equal representation in decision-making processes. It should serve as a timely opportunity to underscore the importance of further promoting the strategic objective #7 (women in power and decision-making) of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and underscoring the accelerated action needed to reach the target of 50/50 gender balance and women's equal leadership in the UN system.

Meanwhile, while continuing their call upon the UN system to work towards gender parity, member states must also show that they are committed to gender balance in their own representation as well. So far, this has not been the case. Currently, of the 192 members of the UN, only 13 have women ambassadors as their permanent representatives in New York, 13 in Geneva, and 16 in Vienna. This is an indication that in most countries, women are scarce in the pool of senior diplomatic talent that member states draw from in appointing their permanent representatives to the UN.

The rarity of women as ambassadors and senior diplomats at individual country missions to the UN extends to the rarity of women as chairs or presidents in various inter-governmental bodies. Of the main bodies of the UN, the General Assembly presidency has been occupied by a woman just once in its entire 60 years. The Economic and Social Council had its first woman president just last year. (The Security Council presidency rotates on a monthly basis, and has had a number of women chairs.). At the lower levels of inter-governmental deliberation also, such as the six main committees of the General Assembly and the functional commissions under ECOSOC, women in chairpersonships have been rare. The CSW, by the very nature of its substance, has been an exception.

My two years as chairperson of the CSW (March 2003-March 2005) gave me an extensive opportunity to work closely with representatives of other member governments of the commission, the active NGO constituency around the CSW, and the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) as well as the Conference Services and other offices of the UN Secretariat. Reflecting back upon those two years, I can draw some general observations about women's leadership at the UN beyond the quantitative picture given above.

First, the core of the United Nations is inter-governmental deliberation, i.e. representatives of member governments sitting together to discuss issues and challenges facing the global community and trying to

arrive at a common decision on what to do about them. The more transparent and inclusive the process, the greater the likelihood of its success, measured in terms of the outcome. Though he/she may not be able to shape the outcome, the chairperson has the responsibility to steer the process in a transparent and inclusive manner so that all delegations feel included and listened to. The typical characteristics of women's leadership, such as pragmatism, compromise, inclusiveness and consensus-building are ideal for presiding over such a process. With many more women chairs and presidents, I believe, the inter-governmental process at the UN would be greatly enhanced.

Second, the NGO presence at the UN, both formal and informal, continues to expand, and government leaders of UN bodies must make close consultation with the NGO partners a routine and continual part of their work. Under my chairpersonship, the bureau of the CSW met regularly with NGO partners, and tried to address the concerns of the NGO community in the build-up to and during the formal sessions of the Commission. I do believe that the success of the 48th and 49th session was due in part to the responsive of the bureau to active input from the NGO partners, whose initiatives and input encouraged the bureau and member states to think outside the box.

Third, in the UN Secretariat, as an organization of international civil servants dedicated to advancing the goals of equality, development and peace around the world, some of the most effective and respected leaders and managers have been women. Led by women managers, the Division for the Advancement of Women is one of the most professional and effective departments in the UN Secretariat. At the highest levels of leadership in the UN system in the past, Mary Robinson, former High Commission for Human Rights and Hadaka Ogata, former High Commission for Refugees come to mind. Based on track record of performance alone, even before the goal of gender parity, women leaders deserve expanded presence in the senior levels of leadership in the UN system. Individual member states and the NGO community should continue to forward the names of competent women candidates for key leadership posts in the UN. It shouldn't be too long before the UN has its first women Secretary-General.