HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE HAGUE FORUM  
TUESDAY, 9 FEBRUARY 1999

On Tuesday, 9 February delegates met in the Main Committee to consider the thematic area of “Gender Equality, Equity and Empowerment of Women” in the morning and “Reproductive Health, Including Family Planning, Sexual Health, and Reproductive Rights” in the afternoon. US First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton delivered the keynote address of the Forum, and governments and international organizations delivered statements on the operational relevance and assessment of POA implementation at the country level in Plenary throughout the day.

MAIN COMMITTEE

GENDER EQUALITY, EQUITY AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: Maria Isabel Plata, Executive Director of PROFA-MILIA, set out the ICPD goals for this area, which include: advancing gender equality, equity and empowerment of women; strengthening women’s reproductive rights; supporting men to take responsibility for their behavior and attitudes; and eradicating violence against women.

Several speakers emphasized the importance of incorporating a gender perspective in the development of policies. The UK emphasized constant attention to mainstreaming of gender concerns in the protection of women’s human rights as its priority. CANADA, supported by MALAYSIA and others, stressed the need for a human rights-based approach to POA implementation and the importance of drawing on other commitments, such as those under the Beijing Platform of Action, to strengthen ICPD implementation. ST. KITTS AND NEVIS added CEDAW, stressing that all human rights conventions speak to the same issue, and, with the ARAB GROUP, called for a removal of cultural, religious, cultural and traditional policies. LESOTHO, BOLIVIA, URUGUAY and SYRIA underlined the need to raise women’s awareness of their rights.

Numerous interventions underscored protection of the girl child. MALAYSIA stressed the need for early education of girls and boys on gender equality and recommended examining the role of the family and parental responsibility to incorporate this into socialization. She noted negative effects of financial crises on girls’ education and called for social safety nets to address them. GREECE advocated giving more focus to vocal training for girls as well as sexual education. PERU and LIBERIA said improving female literacy is crucial to women’s empowerment. CUBA stressed education and training of women in technical professional fields.

THE YOUTH FORUM recommended including instruction on democracy, sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender equality in schools. NAMIBIA stated that discriminatory attitudes regarding girls’ access to education must change. The US said the gender gap in education must be closed by overcoming cultural and social obstacles to girls’ school attendance. The HOLY SEE called for a broad understanding of education with emphasis on complete education of the girl child and highlighted the centrality of the girl. LAOS emphasized the need for study, research and investment in education. ALGERIA recommended support for young women seeking their first job. The US and others stressed reducing sex trafficking and female genital mutilation (FGM).

Women seeking safe abortion. NAMIBIA recommended examining and amending existing laws and emphasized enforcement of laws protecting women’s rights. EL SALVADOR noted a need for comprehensive multi-disciplinary programs to prevent violence, and called upon to eliminate discrimination and discrimination against women in running for public office.

Delegates advocated increasing the number of women in decision making positions. The US, supported by BELIZE and BANGLADESH, called for expanded participation of women at the highest political levels. HONDURAS, UGANDA and others highlighted increasing numbers of women in parliaments but stressed the need for greater integration of women in politics. BELGIUM recommended compensation for women’s disadvantaged position through measures such as quotas for women in political and advisory roles. LESOTHO noted the absence of women in public office despite high educational attainment and stressed the need to break cultural barriers to women’s empowerment. BANGLADESH identified financial constraints, lack of training and lack of political nominations as obstacles.

Participants spoke of the need to strengthen institutions. CANADA recommended establishing internal women’s agencies within government that advise specific ministries on mainstreaming gender perspectives. UNIFEM supported capacity building in policy-making bodies and the need for gender mainstreaming in all areas, not just in those with gender implications.

The need to change negative attitudes and stereotypes towards women was emphasized. MOROCCO noted the role of the media in this regard. CUBA advocated sensitization of people and gender training of officers and the media to the need for gender equality and equity. NAMIBIA highlighted national efforts to sensitize traditional leaders on women’s rights. PAKISTAN and LIBERIA stressed breaking customs and traditions that prohibit women from exercising their rights.

Regarding changes that disproportionately impact on women, FRANCE emphasized the need to ensure that increasing privatization does not cause poor women to be excluded from health care. GUYANA called for attention to women’s roles in globalization on women’s employment and, with BELIZE, proposed examining different forms of the family, particularly single female-headed households. BRAZIL, with ITALY and PERU, supported increased attention to the needs of aged women. SENEGAL called for more attention to women in rural areas. ARGENTINA highlighted consideration of migration, privacy, the family and impacts of developed country consumption on environmental deterioration. ITALY recommended creating networks of special committees for equal gender opportunities in Muslim countries.

The need to eliminate discrimination and violence against women was emphasized by several speakers. CANADA said eradicating violence against women is central to achieving equality and requires integrated, holistic and multi-disciplinary approaches, legal, social and economic reforms and involvement of institutions, NGOs and civil society. LATIN AMERICAN NGOs called for legislative changes to deter sexual abuse of girls. A PHILIPPINE NGO emphasized that violence against women must be recognized as a rights violation and recommended amending laws punishing
UGANDA said banning FGM is important but must be approached in a culturally sensitive manner. Many delegates addressed the need for concrete measures to strengthen family planning and reproductive health services.

**REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH, INCLUDING FAMILY PLANNING AND SEXUAL HEALTH AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS: Dr. Mahmoud Fathalla, Rockefeller Foundation Senior Advisor, introduced the topic, underscoring: the comprehensiveness of reproductive health services; the need to integrate reproductive health as a human rights-based approach; impacts on reproductive health of factors outside the health sector; consideration of reproductive health as an integrated and interdependent package responsible for reproductive health; and the need to ensure human rights to safe abortion; ensuring that women suffering complications from unsafe abortions be treated humanely; and fighting laws that punish abortions performed in line with medical rules.**

On HIV/AIDS, BRAZIL and TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO called for greater emphasis on prevention and treatment, particularly for adolescents and women. UNAIDS stressed the need to integrate prevention into general health programmes and supported strengthening of the reproductive rights of those living with HIV. FRANCE emphasized the need for reproductive health services and HIV/AIDS and supported amplifying preventive measures, particularly through contraception. GHANA called for affordable access to testing and life-prolonging drugs in developing countries.

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

US First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton delivered the keynote address of the Forum. She reaffirmed the US government’s commitment to improving the ICPD goals and announced its commitment to increased funding by a government agency. She highlighted efforts to make abortion safe, legal and rare and outlined activities aimed at reducing teenage pregnancy. She said governments have no place in the personal decisions of women and that decisions should make on whether or not to bear children, emphasizing that this is a decision that should be made freely and responsibly without government coercion. She underscored the need to invest in human resources and give equal access to reproductive health services to all women.

**PLENARY**

Statements by governments and international organizations on operational review and assessment of POA implementation at the country level highlighted: reproductive health and services; awareness creation among adolescents; women’s empowerment; the HIV/AIDS epidemic; migration; partnerships; and creation of economic incentives and improved reproductive health facilities. Several countries observed a marked increase in the numbers of women in decision-making positions and reported the establishment of national policy frameworks and sanitation programmes. They stressed that the ability to effectively implement the POA depends on overcoming social, political and cultural barriers, enhancing human and institutional capacities and making resources available. They urged donor countries to fulfill their financial commitments, eliminated obstacles to contraceptive technology, and increased the number of contraceptive units. They also urged increased support for education programmes to reduce maternal mortality. NAMIBIA recommended lobbying to legalize abortion. A LATIN AMERICAN NGO NETWORK highlighted the lack of integrated reproductive health services for poor women and the consequences of unsafe illegal abortion. She recommended: educating service providers on safe abortion; ensuring that women suffering complications from unsafe abortions be treated humanely; and fighting laws that punish abortions performed in line with medical rules.

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**IN THE CORRIDORS**

A sense of energy and excitement pervaded the corridors Tuesday following Hillary Rodham Clinton’s keynote address. Delegates indicated that they were refreshed by her forthright and bold articulation of women’s right to choose freely and responsibly with government involvement. Some expressed disappointment over the announcement of commitment to increased funding by a government criticized for poorly timed budget cuts would inspire other donors. Delegates said her speech consolidated the position of women and engendered a sense of impetus for the week ahead.

**THINGS TO LOOK FOR TODAY**

**PLENARY:** Plenary will convene at 10:00 am in the Van Gogh Room to continue deliberations on Reproductive Health, Including Family Planning and Sexual Health, and Reproductive Rights. Consideration of the substantive theme of Building Partnerships will begin at 3:00 pm.