

Testimony of Dr. Esther Brimmer
Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs
Women as Agents of Change: Advancing the Role of Women
in Politics and Civil Society
House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on
International Organizations, Human Rights and Oversight
June 9, 2010

Chairman Carnahan, Ranking Member Rohrabacher, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to testify.

It is an honor for me to appear before this subcommittee which has demonstrated great leadership in supporting the empowerment of women globally. Your attention and that of Congress to this important issue which impacts billions of women, girls and families around the world is welcome and deeply appreciated.

I am also pleased to be here today with my distinguished colleague Melanne Vermeer, Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. The President's decision to create a position of Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues is unprecedented, and reflects the elevated importance of empowering women globally to the President and this entire Administration

In March at the UN Commission on the Status of Woman Secretary Clinton said, "The status of the world's women is not only a matter of morality and justice. It is also a political, economic, and social imperative. Put simply, the world cannot make lasting progress if women and girls in the 21st century are denied their rights and left behind."

The Obama Administration truly believes that an investment in women and children is an investment in our own security, prosperity and future and that of the planet. We know that when women and girls have quality healthcare, education and economic opportunities, their families flourish and the communities and nations in which they live advance in terms of development and security.

If you think about it -- what happens to women and girls truly impacts the security of the United States and the international community. We know this because we see that the suffering and denial of the rights of women and the instability of nations go hand in hand.

The global empowerment of women and girls will not happen overnight. It will require persistence and a multilateral commitment to realize change on a global scale. Toward that end, the Obama Administration is firmly committed to working with the United Nations and international partners, including non-governmental organizations, to advance women's rights, freedoms, and opportunities.

Improving the Lives of Women and Girls Multilaterally and through the UN:

Over the past sixty years, we have seen visible progress in the empowerment of women globally, from the signing of the United Nations Charter in San Francisco in 1945 which refers to " the equal rights of men and women", to the establishment of the Commission on the Status of Women in 1946, to the Beijing Platform for Action, the outcome document adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. Now in 2010 on the 15th Anniversary of Beijing, we dedicate ourselves to the unfinished agenda of Beijing and to continued efforts at the United Nations and multilaterally with regional, national, and local leaders to realize gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Today, the Obama Administration is working with the United Nations and in the UN system to address violence against women and girls, in particular sexual violence; promote women's political and economic empowerment; increase women's access to healthcare to address maternal mortality and HIV/AIDS, among other health concerns; and improve access to quality education.

Gender Architecture at the UN

The United States strongly supports strengthening the institutional arrangements at the UN for support of gender equality and the empowerment of women. Toward that end, we believe that consolidating the UN's existing gender-related institutions, into a single women's agency, is vital for women around the world and the effectiveness of the United Nations.

Currently the UN has four separate organizations, the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues, the UN Division for the Advancement of Women, the UN Development Fund for Women, and the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women that focus on aspects of women's issues throughout the UN system.

Creation of the new consolidated entity will lead to better coordination between the UN's normative or standard setting functions, including those performed by the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), and its operational activities.

Under the leadership of Secretary Clinton, Ambassador Rice, Ambassador Verveer and myself, the United States is hard at work with international partners to reform the UN's gender related institutions. These efforts have resulted in consensus adoption of UN General Assembly Resolution 63/311 in September 2009. The resolution calls for consolidating the four existing UN gender-related bodies into a gender composite entity headed by an Under Secretary-General, a status higher than current configurations. We believe this move will elevate women's issues to their rightful status.

The U.S. is taking a leading role in the next stage of the reform efforts. Member states are in the process of negotiating another General Assembly resolution, with the aim of completing negotiations by late June that would establish the entity and help define its parameters, including its mandates, governance structure, reporting lines, and outlines of its staffing and funding. The U.S. has been working closely with Estonia and Tunisia, the co-Chairs of the reform exercise, as well as with the many nations across regional groups who share our desire for continuing the momentum to set up the entity.

The United States, along with international partners, envisions that the new gender entity would have expertise and perform analysis and research on issues impacting women and girls such as gender equality, political participation, economic opportunities, violence, health, disabilities, gender aspects of peace negotiations, and discrimination against women.

The United States along with UN Member states believe that the new gender entity should emphasize field work in order to bring about concrete improvements to the lives of women and girls. Examples of valuable work in the field include providing women with political, legal and jobs skills training; setting up centers to help rape or domestic violence victims or to help women entrepreneurs; setting up or making improvements to schools for girls; and providing help to women who depend on agriculture for their livelihood.

One of the primary goals for the new entity is to mainstream gender concerns and promote women's empowerment throughout the UN system. The United States feels strongly that even after the entity is set up; we must ensure that all United Nations bodies will remain responsible for considering how their policies and programs will affect both women and men.

Millennium Development Goal on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

The United States is also playing a leading role, along with international partners, in supporting empowerment of women, within the UN system, through the realization of the Millennium Development Goal to promote gender equality and empower women. In fact, during the March Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) session, a resolution on women's economic empowerment was adopted that recognizes that investing in women and girls contributes to productivity and sustained economic growth, thereby contributing to the achievement of the MDGs as a whole.

We believe that the Millennium Development Goal on gender equality is a key MDG, in that all of the other MDG's cannot be achieved without it. For example, four of the MDG targets -- on achieving full and productive employment, ensuring universal primary education, eliminating gender disparity in all levels of education, and reducing maternal mortality -- relate explicitly to women and girls.

In March Secretary Clinton said, "That goal (on gender equality) is essential for the realization of every other goal. Today, this principle is also at the heart of the foreign policy of the United States. We believe that women are critical to solving virtually every challenge we face as individual nations and as a community of nations."

As an illustration of how seriously the United States takes the Millennium Development Goal on women, the United States has stepped up to be one of only a dozen countries making a National Voluntary Presentation at the Annual Ministerial Review portion of the UN's Economic and Social Council session later this month on our activities related to achieving the MDG on gender equality. Ambassador Verveer will be making that presentation.

Women, Peace and Security

The Obama Administration continues to work multilaterally to address some of the most vexing challenges facing women and girls, including the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women, the role of women in peacekeeping, conflict resolution and peace-building and combating sexual and gender-based violence. We are committed to the implementation of the series of UN Security Council resolutions on these topics, including those we have taken leadership on, such as Resolutions 1325 and 1888. Resolution 1888 was a major achievement for the Administration, because it establishes a Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Sexual Violence in Conflict as well as a team of experts to support accountability mechanisms targeting impunity for rape as a weapon of war.

This fall we will mark the 10th Anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325. This resolution was the first adopted by the Security Council to focus on women, peace and security and address the impact of conflict on women and the contributions women can make to solidifying peace.

Last October, through the unanimous adoption of resolution 1889, the Security Council reaffirmed its landmark 2000 resolution 1325 on women and peace and security, and urging Member States, United Nations bodies, and civil society to ensure that woman's protection and empowerment was taken into account during post-conflict needs assessment and planning, and factored into subsequent funding and programming.

As we approach the 10-year anniversary of the adoption of resolution 1325, the Security Council and the UN and Member States must continue to call for, and contribute to, 1325's implementation. The United States and international community have made it clear that we must no longer delay in effectively addressing the need to increase women's leadership and participation in peace processes. The U.S. is vigorously supporting efforts to implement resolution 1325 at the United Nations in New York.

With this effort in mind, I'd like to make the following points.

First, on April 27 the U.S. and Security Council members agreed to "take action" in October of this year on a revised set of indicators to track progress of UN Security Council Resolution 1325. Our hope is that the Security Council can support a final set of indicators in October 2010 enabling the UN to embark on its initial phase of their implementation. The United Nations-drafted indicators are being developed to measure global implementation of the provisions of 1325.

The proposed indicators included in the latest Secretary General report represent an important step towards implementation of UNSC 1325. The U.S. will continue to consult with the UN and other delegations on the further conceptual and technical development of these indicators, to ensure their feasibility and applicability.

The U.S. will participate in an October UN Security Council Ministerial expected to be chaired by Uganda to commemorate the 10th Anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, as well as other events on the margins of the UN Security Council session.

The United States is also taking the lead in urging the UN to address the serious gaps that exist in monitoring and reporting of women, peace and security issues. With improved monitoring and reporting, the Security Council and the international community will be better positioned to develop effective strategy, policy, training, and to urge accountability when necessary.

Second, we believe that coordination between the UN office charged with overseeing efforts to implement Resolution 1325 and the office of the Special Representative for Sexual Violence in Conflict will be important to address overlapping issues and avoid duplicative efforts. While Resolution 1325's primary focus is on empowerment and increasing women's leadership and participation in peace processes, we must also be mindful of the dire need to in parallel ensure the physical security of women and girls – an area where UN missions can also play an important role.

The United States is also playing a part in fulfilling Resolution 1325's goal to have more women serve as peacekeepers. The Department of Defense recently deployed a team of female Marines to Afghanistan to work on issues related to the impact of the conflict there on women. The U.S. sponsored and is working to pass a resolution in the Human Rights Council condemning attacks on schools for girls in Afghanistan." The United States has also taken steps to ensure that its \$26 million global reconciliation program, which supports conflict mitigation through people-to-people approaches, promotes the substantive participation of women.

Combating Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and Implementation of UNSCR 1888

One the most serious challenges facing the international community is sexual violence perpetrated against women and children.

As we know, abundant information exists about violence against women in conflict and post-conflict situations, including the widespread and systematic use of rape. Yet international efforts to address such violence are often hindered by lack of political will and by assertions that the information is insufficient to warrant action.

To address this problem, the United States initiated resolutions in both the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council that call upon States to take specific actions towards ending the use of sexual violence in armed conflict. We believe that effective implementation of these resolutions is crucial.

The U.S. has advocated a zero tolerance policy and has joined with the UN and international community in sending an unequivocal message that sexual violence against women and children in conflict must be stopped.

Last September, Secretary Clinton chaired a Security Council session and helped lead the unanimous adoption of a US-sponsored Security Council Resolution 1888 to strengthen protection of civilians from sexual violence in conflict, building upon US-sponsored Security Council Resolution 1820 that categorized sexual violence as a weapon of war for the first time.

The resolution championed practical ways to counter one of the most abhorrent features of modern war: the use of rape and sexual violence, as a weapon, against women and children. Further, it directed the Secretary-General to appoint the first-ever Special Representative to prevent sexual and gender based violence in conflict situations.

Since UN Security Council Resolution 1888 was passed last September, there has been momentum toward protecting women, girls and other civilians. However we know that we must do more to further advance international efforts to prevent sexual and gender based violence. As Secretary Clinton has said, sexual violence harms not merely single individuals, families, and villages; it also “shreds the fabric that weaves us together as human beings.”

We will continue to work hand in hand with the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Margot Wallstrom, to lead and coordinate efforts to end conflict-related sexual violence against women and children.

We are pleased that Special Representative Wallstrom has begun her work by dealing immediately with the worsening situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). At the same time, more work needs to be done on developing frameworks and initiatives for addressing sexual violence issues overall, while attention must be focused on specific countries and regions where atrocities are occurring even as we speak, and where victims of sexual violence are not receiving the critical support and assistance that they need.

As we recognize the progress being made, we are also aware of the long and difficult road ahead, including endemic sexual and gender-based violence, developing links between our current efforts and successful strategies for United Nation peacekeeping missions, such as those in DRC and Liberia, building an enduring team of experts who can work throughout the UN system, and ending sexual and gender-based violence that continues after conflicts subside.

Education

We believe that investing in the education of women and girls is not only the “right thing to do; but it is the smart thing to do.” That is why we are committed to working with the United Nations and the international community in the lead up to 2015 to promote gender equality and the global empowerment of women and the education-related Millennium Development Goals.

The United States is working with key international partners, including the United Nations, and the UN specialized agencies, such as UNESCO and UNICEF, to expand girls’ and women’s access to education in all forms and at all levels.

As we seek to empower women through education, we must think of new ways to reach women and make education and skills training relevant to their lives. Some progress has been made with regard to enrollment in primary school for girls.

According to the 2010 Education For All Global Monitoring Report, the share of out-of-school girls has declined from 58% to 54% and the gender gap is narrowing in primary education in many countries. However we know that one of the challenges is not only enrollment in basic education, but also getting girls to stay in school and creating an environment where they can successfully transfer from primary to secondary school and consider post-secondary options.

We know that literacy is a critical first step for acquiring the skills needed to participate fully in one's society. Of the 759 million adults who lack basic literacy skills around the world, two-thirds are women. UN organizations are helping governments, teachers, funders, NGOs, and students build capacity and address challenges to reaching these adults that lack basic literacy skills. Since rejoining UNESCO, one of our top priorities has been promoting literacy, with a particular focus on girls and women.

To that end, quality providers of informal/non-formal education have played and will continue to play a key role in decreasing the global adult literacy rate. We know that informal education can be more flexible and help reach adults who have long ago dropped out of the formal schools system or who were systematically denied access to school.

As the largest government donor to UNICEF, the United States is supporting efforts to support safe schools, quality education for each and every girl and boy. For example, UNICEF's Child-Friendly Schools model which has been implemented in more than 50 countries, utilizes curricula that are specifically inclusive and gender-sensitive.

Where barriers to gender equity exist, UNICEF works with governments to develop alternative education methods that promote gender inclusiveness in education. In Afghanistan, UNICEF has helped establish community-based schools in rural areas that allow for the participation of girls. In 2008, the Government of Afghanistan ran 815 of these community-based schools, with an enrolment of nearly 30,000 students.

CEDAW

Let me reiterate the Administration's strong commitment to ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Secretary Clinton and other Administration principals have stated that CEDAW ratification is a priority. The Secretary stated that, "The Obama Administration will continue to work for the ratification of CEDAW ... because we believe it is past time, to take this step for women in our country and in all countries."

Commission on the Status of Women

The United States was pleased with the results of the March 2010 Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). We accomplished our main objectives. Common themes in presentations by U.S. Government principals included addressing maternal and child mortality and helping women living with HIV/AIDS; combating violence against women, especially sexual violence; food security for women; and setting up the gender composite entity.

One of the highlights was when the United States and co-sponsors from the various regional groups introduced a resolution on "Eliminating Preventable Maternal Mortality and Morbidity through the Empowerment of Women," which was adopted by consensus with a large number of co-sponsors. CSW member states also adopted a resolution on the United Nations gender composite entity. This was significant, as this meant that the CSW made an affirmative statement in favor of setting up this new entity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the U.S. approach to women's issues stems from the fundamental principle articulated at 1995 Beijing UN World Conference, that "women's rights are human rights and human rights are women's rights."

Toward that end our collective efforts to write a new chapter on empowering women will be the tell-tale measure of whether the 21st century is truly one of human and global progress or whether millions of women and girls, representing half of the world's population, will continue to be left behind, undereducated, unprotected, denied economic opportunities and without a voice to advocate for their families, communities and nation.

While there has been measurable progress in improving the lives of women and children, there remain critical goals unfilled, that need greater global attention and global action.

Chairman Carnahan and Subcommittee Members, the Administration looks forward to continuing to work with you and Members of Congress who have already contributed greatly to empowering women globally and addressing one of the 21st century's most important challenges.