



SOUTH ASIA PARTNERSHIP  
SOCIETE ASIATIQUE DES PARTENAIRES  
CANADA

## UN Commission on the Status of Women Canadian Delegation Report-Back

### Presenters:

Chantale Walker, Foreign Affairs Canada  
Julie Bracken, Canadian International  
Development Agency  
Sheila Regehr, Status of Women Canada  
Elizabeth Wright, Baha'i Community of Canada

Seminar  
June 8, 2004  
Ottawa, Canada

Rapporteur: Tara  
Ashtakala

### 1. BACKGROUND

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women became a commission of the Economic and Social Council in 1946, preparing recommendations and reports for it to promote women's rights in the political, economic, civil, social and educational fields. This Commission meets at the United Nations in New York and prepares recommendations to the Council to promote women's rights. A major component of the Commission's work is to follow up on the Platform of Action produced by the Fourth World Conference on Women, which took place in Beijing, China in 1995.

At the Commission's 48<sup>th</sup> session on March 1-12, 2004, the Commission addressed two themes:

1. equal participation for women in conflict prevention, management and resolution and in post-conflict peace-building; and
2. the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality.

The **Agreed Conclusions**, the final document emerging from the session, called for:

- improving data collection, coordination of efforts, capacity-building and resources to ensure women's participation in conflict prevention;
- drafting peace agreements that not only address the needs of women and girls but that enshrine women's participation in all levels of decision-making therein;
- ensuring equal access of women to all stages of the electoral process and of the reconstruction/rehabilitation phases in post-conflict situations;
- encouraging and supporting the capacity of men and boys in fostering gender equality;
- creating and improving training and education programmes to raise awareness among men of gender equality;
- changing harmful traditional perceptions and attitudes of male and female roles in societies; adopting legislation and/or policies to close the gap between women and men in the labour force;
- encouraging and enabling men and boys to adopt safe and responsible sexual and reproductive behaviour and to prevent HIV/AIDS;

- involving men and boys in the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence and helping them understand how it harms women, men and
- children; and
- carrying out research on the factors which influence the attitudes and behaviours of men and boys towards women and girls.

The two themes addressed by the Commission in New York are particularly relevant to South Asia. South Asia is the only region of the world where the ratio of females to males is the reverse of the global trend of women outnumbering men. In this context, women face serious challenges to their rights. A 1997 report by Pakistan's Mahboob Al-Haq Human Development Centre (*Human Development in South Asia*), produced with assistance from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), said that women in South Asia suffer worse discrimination than in other parts of the world. About 74 million women are "simply missing" from the region, victims of preferential treatment for boys and economic neglect, according to the report.

South Asia Partnership Canada organized an information session to allow SAP members and the public to learn from the Canadian delegation's experience in New York. The delegation consisted of Nell Stewart and Sherry Hornung, Foreign Affairs Canada; Sheila Regehr, Status of Women Canada; Julia Bracken, Canadian International Development Agency; and civil society representatives Elizabeth Wright, Baha'i Community of Canada and Faruq Faisel, formerly of South Asia Partnership Canada. The meeting also gave the women's movement, non-government organizations, private consultants, students and academics the opportunity to discuss and reflect upon decisions made and the debates emerging from the 48<sup>th</sup> session and future directions for both government and civil society to consider in advancing the domestic and international agenda on gender equality.

## 2. SEMINAR PROCEEDINGS

SAP Canada's Pakistan and Peace & Security Program Manager Isabelle Valois chaired the seminar. She first provided some background on South Asia Partnership Canada. The work of SAP Canada focuses on three primary themes: peace and security, sustainable livelihoods and governance and democracy. Gender is a cross-cutting theme. SAP Canada has a number of upcoming activities related to these themes: the Canada Fit for Children Conference on September 13-14 will examine where policies and activities relating to South Asia can fit into Canada's National Plan of Action for Children (which was presented to the UN General Assembly in April 2004). SAP Canada will hold a workshop in June 2004 on Women and Security with an expected 52 participants from South Asia including Afghanistan.

Ms. Valois then presented the speakers:

**Chantale Walker** is a Policy Advisor in the Division of Human Rights, Humanitarian Affairs and International Women's Equality, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade;

**Julia Bracken** is an Analyst in the Policy Branch of the Gender Equality and Child Protection Division at the Canadian International Development Agency;

**Sheila Regehr** is the Acting Director General of the Policy and External Relations Directorate at Status of Women Canada;

**Elizabeth Wright** is the Director of the Bureau pour la promotion de la femme of the Baha'i Community of Canada.

Both SAP Canada and the speakers were pleased to see the interest the seminar had generated. The room was filled to capacity with attendees representing a diverse array of constituencies.

### **Sheila Regehr, Status of Women Canada**

Sheila Regehr started the seminar with a general overview of what transpired both during the Commission meeting and after. She acknowledged the invaluable contribution that the civil society representatives made to the Canadian delegation.

Hon. Jean Augustine, Minister of State (Multiculturalism and Status of Women) headed the delegation. In delivering Canada's statement, the Minister commended the discussion on the role of men and boys in the promotion of gender equality. She noted in particular the fact that the discussions acknowledged the multicultural diversity within that group. Ms. Augustine also highlighted Canada's leadership in promoting Security Council Resolution 1325 (which specifically addresses the impact of war on women, and women's contributions to conflict resolution and sustainable peace) and in creating a Canadian Committee on Women, Peace and Security. The Commission session was particularly useful in affording a rare opportunity for interaction among Ministers with responsibilities for the promotion of gender equality, said the Minister, as well as for "others who are directly charged with finding the right mix of policies, training and mainstreaming initiatives that will empower women and girls".

Ms. Augustine also participated in a high-level Round Table meeting, within the Commission session. The session focused on the users and producers of statistics to share national experiences, good practices and lessons learned in measuring progress in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Special Session of the General Assembly.

The dedication of an entire forum to this topic underscores a growing realization across the international community that without good evidence, it is hard to achieve good social policy: the Round Table speakers emphasized that statistics are a vital tool in reaching the gender goals laid out in the Platform and in monitoring the effectiveness of gender-based policies and programs, as well as in improving the socio-economic situation of women, enhancing their participation in politics and highlighting unequal resources between the sexes. Thus, research is seen as a critical area for the future work of the Commission and its allies in advancing women's rights.

The Commission session was one step in preparation for the conference that will review what has happened in the ten years since the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995. The Commission has decided that this will not be a world conference like its predecessor. However, Beijing + 10 (as the ten-year review conference will be called) will still be a high-level dialogue. The goals for this meeting will be more focused: the anticipated statement to be issued from that review conference will focus on the implementation of existing commitments (i.e. the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome of the 23<sup>rd</sup> special session of the General Assembly) rather than on creating new obligations in the area of women's rights. From the perspective of the Canadian government delegation, sharing of information will be a priority at this meeting.

Status of Women Canada is following all the preparatory, regional and cross-regional discussions leading to Beijing + 10. In the various geographic regions of the Economic Commissions (West Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Europe and North America and Asia-Pacific), different meetings will include reviews of the Beijing platform. Canada will be putting a lot of emphasis and energy on the regional meeting for Europe/North America scheduled for December 5-8, 2004, in Geneva, because of the similar priorities with regard to women's equality that Canada shares with European countries. This particular forum, comprised of separate sessions for NGOs and governments, will focus on women and the economy, institutional mechanisms for gender equality, sexual trafficking as well as violence and poverty.

### **Chantale Walker, Foreign Affairs Canada**

Chantale Walker spoke about what led up to the Agreed Conclusions statement issued by the panel discussion on women, peace and security. Foreign Affairs Canada was responsible for covering this theme, led by the Hon. Mobina Jaffer, Senate of Canada. Senator Jaffer is the Chair of the Committee on Women, Peace and Security, composed of parliamentarians, government department representatives and NGOs. The Committee represents the fulfillment of one of the commitments made by the Government of Canada in the Platform of Action that emerged from the Beijing Conference.

Some interesting activities were held during the 48<sup>th</sup> session. Senator Jaffer participated in a mock trial on the implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325. General Roméo Dallaire, Special Adviser to the Minister for International Cooperation on War-Affected Children, launched Canada's Gender Training Initiative for peacekeepers. He also shared, with the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, an ID-Rom produced by the Canadian Committee on Women, Peace and Security, which powerfully illustrates that women, men, boys and girls all experience war differently. This information is being integrated into UN peacekeeping training programs.

Expert panels took place during the session, on the topics of eradicating poverty through empowering women and on gender perspectives in environmental disaster management and mitigation. What was particularly noteworthy about the panels, from the viewpoint of the Canadian delegation, was the diversity of perspectives represented and the presence of a Canadian expert, Rights and Democracy's Arianne Brunet, on one of the panels.

In developing the government's negotiating position at the session, the Canadian delegation drew upon the information it had gathered from a series of round table events that had been organized in Ottawa by the Canadian Committee on Women, Peace and Security and the YWCA. These sessions looked at the role of women in conflict prevention, specifically how NGOs could use Security Council Resolution 1325 as a tool for advocacy and for contributing to policy development.

The Canadian delegation had four priorities:

- recalling the Secretary General's recommendations on implementing the Beijing Platform
- ensuring implementation of Resolution 1325 remains a priority
- pushing for accountability in implementation, and
- maintaining international standards for women's equality

The Canadian team made small but significant successes in securing language in the negotiations that recalled UNSC Resolution 1325, recalled and reiterated the commitments reached in the Beijing+5 Review Conference and encompassed all the main bodies and actors working on peace process implementation. The delegation kept their contributions focused on peace agreements and electoral processes and strove to keep the language as precise as possible within those parameters. The broader the language, the more difficult implementation becomes.

### **Julia Bracken, Canadian International Development Agency**

Julia Bracken said that the major contributions to the Session were the Secretary General's expert reports and the other thematic background papers that clearly laid out the issues for the Session. The former covered a wide range of topics, including: the situation of women in rural areas, the status of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the status of gender equality within the UN system itself. Of particular interest at this session was the Secretary General's comprehensive report on the follow-up to and progress in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, as well as the outcome document of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Special Session of the General Assembly, which addressed the questions of:

- education and socialization;
- workplace/labour issues for women;
- sharing of family responsibility; and
- the impact of HIV/AIDS.

Going into the negotiations, the delegations had no guarantee that all four issues would be addressed. A plethora of research papers from various UN agencies were available on these issues, especially with respect to HIV/AIDS and the role of men and boys in gender equality. Ultimately, though, the four areas were reflected in three to four paragraphs in the agreed conclusions.

In general, the Session negotiations were driven by three factors:

- the perceived need to produce an outcome document from the Session;
- a desire for Assistant Secretary General and Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women Angela E.V.King to have a successful last session;
- a commitment by the participants to show that the session was productive.

With regard to the general discussions surrounding the role of men and boys in promoting gender equality, the Canadian delegation's position was to seek an outcome document that is forward-looking and that positively highlights what men and boys are already doing to support the rights of women. The delegation also emphasized partnerships with men's and boys' organizations as a key factor in moving further on equality issues. Again, underlying all the delegation's representations was the fundamental commitment to maintaining international standards such as those laid out in the five-year review conferences of both the Beijing Summit and of the 1994 Cairo meeting of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD).

However, the Canadian team was also careful not to press for all the outcomes of each of those conferences during this Commission session, as the ten-year reviews of both Beijing and the ICPD would be taking place in the near future. The Canadian delegation decided that these other review processes were better places to negotiate on certain issues.

The particular focus of the Canadian delegation on the role of men and boys panel was on sexual and reproductive health. This issue was not front-and-centre on the agenda, but rather came up in the discussion on HIV/AIDS. The advantage of it being raised in the context of the discussion on the role of men and boys was that new language and a new angle could be used to discuss the issue. The Agreed Conclusions from past Commissions sessions have addressed all the other issues such as poverty eradication, so the Canadian delegation was pleased to have the opportunity to contribute something new.

The other strength of the Canadian delegation was Canada's strong record of support for human rights, in particular the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was a key tool in the discussions focused on families. The reference to the Convention reinforced the obligation to not differentiate among different forms of families and to recognize the roles and rights of all family members, especially the rights of women and children.

Canada's advocacy at the Session was backed up by quality research. For example, the study by the organization Rights and Democracy on "Girls in Militaries, Paramilitaries and Armed Opposition Groups", which was financed by CIDA, was presented by General Dallaire and received much attention from the other country delegations. The authors conducted field research in three African countries in order to document recruitment methods and the role played by women within these armed groups. The researchers also gathered information on demobilization processes with a view to facilitating the reintegration of these "girl soldiers" within their communities.

Canada played a supporting role on the other issues in the Session, such as gender equality within the UN system itself. The Economic and Social Council is conducting a review and appraisal of the Agreed Conclusions 1997/2 constituting a UN system-wide gender equality mandate and provide guidelines for the UN system to integrate gender considerations throughout its work. These provisions came from a resolution on mainstreaming of gender perspectives into all policies and programs in the UN system which Canada helped to draft at the Women's Commission in 1997. Canada also approved a draft resolution calling upon the transitional and future governments of Afghanistan to ensure that legislative and other measures supported the exercise of women's human rights. However, in a motion on improving the difficult situation and living conditions of Palestinian women and their families, Canada was the only country to abstain from voting.

In looking forward, all advocates for international women's equality need to look at the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This is where the dialogue is currently at the international level. It is the view of both the Women's Commission and of CIDA that none of the MDGs will be achieved without gender equality.

### **NGO Perspective - Elizabeth Wright, Baha'I Community of Canada**

For Elizabeth Wright, this was her third session at the UN Commission on the Status of Women, but the first time on the Canadian delegation. She noted that she was made to feel welcome by the government representatives and that there were daily meetings between the government and the NGO representatives on the delegation. In her experience, the Women's Commission is the most welcoming of all the UN Commissions to NGOs.

Elisabeth was one of two NGO representatives on the Canadian delegation. She was focused on the role of men and boys in promoting gender equality, while her colleague, Faruq Faisal (currently in Kathmandu, Nepal), dealt with the topic of the role of women in peace and conflict. The Session was definitely stimulating and inspiring. However, the reality is that when we come out of the Commission and return to Canada, gender equality is not the current topic of discussion in public policy. Ms. Wright wanted to point out the reaction she encountered when she came back to Canada from the Session and started talking to groups about the Women's Commission. She was surprised to find that a number of women's organizations showed no interest.

Of the two streams of discussion at the Session, the NGO meetings focused more on the role of women in conflict. Much language has been developed on this already, so there was not much for the Canadian delegation to contribute except to call for implementation of existing provisions. The role of men and boys in advancing gender equality generated different opinions among countries. While the Caribbean nations considered this to be a very important matter in the context of reducing rates the high rates of HIV/AIDS in their region, it did not always fit the cultural expectations of other countries. For example, birth control is a sensitive topic to begin with in those societies where religious laws are paramount, and the idea of encouraging boys to use contraception or even to regulate their own fertility, let alone acknowledging that HIV is a pressing problem, has met with resistance in those quarters.

For both panel topics, however, the Commission session raised a number of questions for Ms. Wright and the NGO community in general with regard to implementation of existing resolutions and other provisions with respect to women in conflict. If women are to participate more in peace processes, will the men in existing positions of leadership, either within government or in the military, be willing to give up some of their power? If so, they will not only have to give up power, but resources, too, have to be shared. There is a real danger that as the competition for funding among men's and women's groups increases, that resources for women will decrease, because men still have important positions of leadership in society and the accompanying share of resources. Men have even defined human rights. Will men also define the problems of women? Even if there are educational programs for men and boys on the topic of gender equality, it is critical that women be involved in designing and teaching such programs. The overarching question, though, is: Who is pushing the women's equality agenda – men or women?

The question that she said could be answered is: What can NGOs do? They can participate in programming and developing projects to promote equality between women and men. They can support the government in policy measures to achieve the same results. They can work to convince women that more men should be involved.

### **3. DISCUSSION:**

Julia Bracken, CIDA, noted with regard to Ms. Wright's question about who is leading the women's agenda at the Commission, that the themes on the Session's agenda were negotiated by member States. These States decide what issues are going to be discussed beforehand. In response to the question of what NGOs and the government can do to meet the challenges raised by Ms. Wright's questions, Ms. Bracken cited the Secretary General's report for raising good points and giving concrete examples of how men and boys are supporting gender equality. We need to keep talking about these issues so that we can move forward, she said.

This response raised a question from one of the attendees. She said that it seemed, from the presentations today and from the outcomes of recent international meetings since the Beijing +5 Review Conference, that we have fallen into the trap of talking about how best we can preserve the gains we have made, but not really about moving forward. The participant asked: what perspective will the Government of Canada take to the Beijing+10 Review Conference? Will the delegation really have the political will to make advances?

Sheila Regehr, Status of Women Canada, replied that in terms of international human rights law, the international community are far ahead now of where we were at the time of the Beijing and Beijing + 5 Conferences. However, it should be realized that in international negotiations, it takes years to go from introducing an issue on the global agenda to actually negotiating it. Frankly, a high level of fear within the international community hampers progress regarding women's rights. The North-South split is evident. The Middle Eastern countries, for example, have made it clear that they are not willing to work with Western nations at this time on any social progress issues. This is probably not the best time to look at setting new standards or introducing new instruments enshrining women's rights. Rather, if we focus on best practices and build that body of knowledge, it will help implement what standards are already there. As such, down the road, when the atmosphere within the international community is more open to new standards of rights for women, we will have the evidence base we need, she said. It is practice that keeps moving the benchmarks up.

Another participant asked whether there was any thought of expanding NGO participation on the delegation in the future. Sheila Regehr replied that the government is looking at different ways of doing so. This year is the first in which there will be both regional and full international meetings on women's rights, so NGO participation will be a priority. However, no promises can be made until after the federal election.

Another questioner asked whether there were any plans for a national consultation between the government and Canadian NGOs on preparing for the Beijing + 10 Conference; additionally, the participant asked for clarification on how NGOs can use the Agreed Conclusions from the CSW in their work.

Sheila Regehr responded that the UN runs on Resolutions or Agreed Conclusions. The challenge of delegations is to come up with ways to put those conclusions into programs and policies, so governments can implement them. There are many ways that governments and NGOs can collaborate to achieve this. Another government representative added that there has been discussion about turning the expert group meeting report into guidelines that can be used by the Division for the Advancement of Women.



An example of using progress is the promotion of Security Council Resolution 1325 and its upcoming fourth anniversary. The Government of Canada is in the process of talking to other countries about how to reaffirm and promote this important declaration on the rights of women in situations of armed conflict. The Canadian government feels that 1325 has yet to be fully implemented. On July 1, Canada, Chile, the United Kingdom and the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security is organizing a workshop for the Security Council on Resolution 1325 and is preparing a checklist on how to use it. Furthermore, the Canadian Committee on Women, Peace and Security is organizing a series of Round Tables across Canada on 1325, looking at what NGOs are doing to implement it, what gaps the government should be addressing and the focus of 1325 itself. There will also be a virtual consultation to present the findings of the roundtables to a broader audience, such as on the Gender, Peace and Security list-serve. In addition to training, Canada will also be looking to expand work on sexual exploitation and abuse. A final area of focus for the government will be trying to bridge the gap between gender, peace and security on the one hand, and civilian protection in armed conflict on the other. Of course, the government is open to the suggestions of the NGO community as to what the areas of priority should be.

One NGO representative said that a major problem is the inadequate implementation of strong conventions that Canada has signed and the lack of mechanisms for accountability. The representative suggested that there should be a permanent Parliamentary Committee for NGOs to approach when they think Canada is actually contravening an international obligation regarding women.

Another participant suggested that another possible mechanism for advancing the progress made at the Commission could be the government's current International Policy Review process. The Foreign Affairs Canada representative in attendance agreed and said that the NGO community should make sure its voice is heard in this forum. Another attendee pointed out that the National Security Review had just been completed and it would be interesting to see how those recommendations would feed into the International Policy Review Process with regard to women. Another NGO in the audience stated that its membership had passed a resolution supporting 1325 and that they will take it to their international meeting this year.

The multiplicity of conferences and resolutions prompted the comment that there is a need for coherence among all of these agreements and declarations. There is no coordinated effort among women's groups in Canada on how to really make a difference with respect to Resolution 1325 and on broader gender issues beyond the discussion stage.

Chantale Walker, Foreign Affairs Canada, said that the greatest barrier to implementing Resolution 1325 at the international level is political will. The second biggest barrier is, when Canada has discussions regarding armed conflict and peace agreements, the automatic tendency is to talk about security first as the pre-eminent priority; human rights comes later and women are even further down on the list. So the challenge is to think about human rights from the start.

Isabelle Valois of SAP Canada responded to the comment about lack of coordination among women's groups in Canada, saying that Status of Women Canada might be able to contribute financially towards that end, in the same way that the Fédération des Femmes du Québec is presently doing for Québec women's NGOs.

Peter Moore, Communications Coordinator of SAP Canada, asked what role South Asian countries played and how that compared with Canada's position at the Commission session. Chantale Walker said that the Group of 77 countries, in which the South Asian countries were included, negotiated as a bloc, led by Qatar, so it is difficult to determine what individual country positions were. Nevertheless, both India and Pakistan were vocal in the discussions; there was considerable debate raised by the Asian countries on the meaning of some terms, such as "masculinization" and how does it apply to individual country contexts. However, their intent in asking these questions was to clarify unfamiliar terminology.

Isabelle Valois reminded the audience that India's priority is still the war on terror and has used that position, at least until recently, to preemptively strike down arguments and generally deflect discussion about women and armed conflict. Similarly, Pakistan avoids addressing this topic by pointing to the fact that there are no women soldiers in Pakistan, but ignoring the question of how the huge military budget in that country negatively impacts the promotion of gender equality.

#### **4. CONCLUSION:**

In conclusion, the Session and Canada's participation in it achieved some concrete and significant results. It was agreed that involvement of men and boys in promoting gender equality was critical to reaching gender equality in a number of areas. Real change would come only when stereotypical attitudes, which inhibited women's advancement and impeded efforts for gender equality are removed.

Regarding women and conflict, it was agreed that it was essential to focus on the gender dimension by all actors to ensure that full advantage was taken of the window of opportunity presented by peace processes, the resulting peace agreement and its implementation. The Agreed Conclusions also highlighted the need to institutionalize women's participation in peace processes and train women in peace-building, negotiation and prevention.

The Session further accomplished a great deal in terms of gender mainstreaming in the UN system. It had additionally broadened interactive debates with members of other commission and had charted the way forward, the particularly the role of women in achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Other goals of the international community must not be seen as competition, but as opportunities to ensure that gender perspectives are fully included in all discussions and decisions.

For Canada's part, the development of the unique and positive partnership between government and civil society in furthering negotiations and implementing conclusions reached at every step of the process leading up to Beijing + 10, is an important ingredient in reaching the goals reached set at the 48<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women.