

Statement by

Carolyn Hannan
Director

United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women

to the

Third Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

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Mr. Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to address the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues at its third session in my capacity as Director of the Division for the Advancement of Women of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. I would like to begin by congratulating you, Mr. Chairperson, and the members of the Permanent Forum, for selecting the issue "Indigenous Women" as the special theme for your third session. Your deliberations will not only contribute to furthering understanding of the critical issues and challenges facing indigenous women today but will also provide an important platform by which gender perspectives can be more fully integrated into the work of the United Nations on indigenous peoples.

The Division for the Advancement of Women promotes and supports the mainstreaming of gender perspectives into the work of all United Nations intergovernmental bodies, as well into the policies and programmes of entities of the United Nations system, including those relating to the protection and promotion of human rights. Among our main functions are the substantive servicing of the Commission on the Status of Women, the functional commission of the Economic and Social Council mandated to develop the international policy framework for the advancement of women. The Division also provides the substantive and technical servicing of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the expert body responsible for monitoring implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

In addition, the Division provides advisory services and technical cooperation programmes, on request of Member States, aimed at supporting the implementation of the recommendations of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the review of its implementation by the General Assembly, as well as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and its Optional Protocol.

Mr. Chairperson, ladies and gentlemen

In April 2003, the Division for the Advancement of Women contributed a conference room paper to the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues at its second session held in New York from 12 to 23 May 2003. That paper (E/C.19/2003/CRP.1) provided an overview of the work of the Commission on the Status of Women and of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on the issue of indigenous women. Given the special theme of this session, the Division has updated the information contained in that paper to reflect developments up to April 2004. I trust that the updated paper will be pertinent to the work of the Permanent Forum during this session.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, recognized that women can face additional barriers to the enjoyment of their human rights because they are indigenous people, and made recommendations concerning the adoption of a declaration on the rights of indigenous people and the translation of laws and information relating to the equal status and human rights of all women into indigenous languages.

The twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century" made a number of recommendations concerning indigenous women, including that Governments should address the barriers women face in accessing and participating in politics and decision-making; take concrete steps to address the impact of violence on them; consider adopting national legislation to protect their knowledge, innovations and practices relating to traditional medicines, biodiversity and indigenous technologies; undertake appropriate data collection and research; and develop and implement educational and training programmes that respect their history, culture, spirituality, languages and aspirations and ensure their access to all levels of education.

At its forty-fifth session in 2001, the Commission on the Status of Women addressed indigenous women in its Agreed Conclusions on gender and all forms of discrimination, in particular racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. Recalling that the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action recognized that women face barriers to full equality and advancement because, inter alia, they are indigenous women, the Commission recommended that Governments, the United Nations and civil society take measures to promote and strengthen policies and programmes for indigenous women with their full participation and respect for their cultural diversity, to combat discrimination based on gender and race, and to ensure their full enjoyment of all human rights.

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has addressed the situation of indigenous women in many of its concluding comments on the reports of States parties. In its concluding comments on Canada, for example, the Committee expressed concern about discrimination faced by aboriginal women, noting that they, among other highly vulnerable groups of women, were concentrated in lower-skill and lower paying occupations; that they constituted a high percentage of those women who had not completed secondary education and a high percentage of women serving prison sentences; and that they suffered high rates of domestic violence. The Committee expressed concern about the high level of poverty especially among rural and indigenous women in El Salvador, and the high school drop-out rates among girls, particularly in rural

and indigenous areas. It expressed concern about indigenous women in Mexico, noting that their health, education and employment indicators were below the national average, and was concerned that indigenous women were innocent victims of violence in conflict areas in that country. It also expressed concern about illiteracy of indigenous women in Panama, as well as about violence against indigenous women, including sexual violence, and their poverty and lack of access to contraception in Peru. In its concluding comments on Australia, the Committee indicated that violence, life expectancy, unemployment and health of indigenous women remained issues of concern. The Committee also expressed concern about discrimination against Sami women in its concluding comments on Finland and on Sweden. In all these circumstances, the Committee made specific recommendations to the States parties concerned relating to the concerns it raised.

Within the United Nations system, concerted efforts have been made by individual entities, including human rights treaty bodies, specialized agencies, funds and programmes, and in the context of interagency collaboration, to bring greater attention to the situation of indigenous women. There is a need, however, for a more systematic approach to identifying and addressing gender perspectives in policies and programmes on indigenous issues.

Mr. Chairperson, ladies and gentlemen,

As the Permanent Forum strengthens its focus on indigenous women through this session, it is important to recognize that indigenous women around the world still face many challenges related to the impact of armed conflict; the consequences of poverty; the persistence of violence, including violence perpetrated by state authorities and domestic violence; and marginalization and discrimination, particularly with regard to access to health care and services, education, employment, ownership of land, and management of natural resources. There is growing recognition of the compounded disadvantages faced by indigenous women and girls as a result of multiple forms of discrimination on the basis of sex, ethnicity, religion and language.

However, while there is a need to highlight the very real vulnerability of indigenous women and girls, they should not only be seen solely as victims. Indigenous women and girls are also major actors, agents of change and contributors to development at all levels. Concerted efforts must be made to involve and support indigenous women and their organizations in policy formulation and decision-making processes, and to ensure their access to resources on an equal footing with men, to facilitate their participation in and contribution to the social, cultural, economic and political development of their communities and nations.

Mr. Chairperson, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to end by briefly mentioning some challenges and areas for further reflection and action. A concern that is frequently raised is the gap between existing human rights legislation and the de facto situations facing indigenous peoples. This presents a challenge to international mechanisms for the effective protection of human rights, including petition procedures, such as the Optional Protocol to the Convention on

the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, now ratified by 60 States parties.

A related issue is the capacity of collective rights to coexist with individual rights. This is a complex issue which raises many questions, for example whether the adherence to indigenous institutions and practices might, under certain circumstances, violate individual human rights, including those of women and girls. There is much debate on the issue, but commentators have argued that the debate should not focus on whether these sets of rights can coexist, but rather on how to achieve coexistence.

A third issue I would like to raise is the challenge of mainstreaming attention to the priorities and concerns of indigenous women and girls in all work on indigenous issues, by this Permanent Forum, Governments, United Nations intergovernmental bodies, United Nations entities, other international and regional organizations and indigenous groups themselves. It is critical to develop ways and means to ensure the situation of indigenous women and girls is given explicit attention in all work on land rights and access to and control over resources such as forests and water; in work on education, health and employment; in efforts to protect and promote human rights and increase representation and participation; and in work with youth and children.

Mr. Chairperson, ladies and gentlemen,

Your work on the issue of indigenous women takes place at a critical time. At its forty-ninth session in 2005, the Commission on the Status of Women will undertake a comprehensive review and appraisal of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and of the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. The review and appraisal by the Commission will identify achievements, gaps and challenges and provide an indication of areas where actions and initiatives, within the framework of the Platform for Action and the outcome of the special session, are most urgent to further implementation.

In preparing for the review and appraisal report to be submitted to the Commission, the Division for the Advancement of Women will utilize a variety of information sources, including existing national reports and action plans and statistics already submitted to the United Nations. To complement this, a questionnaire has been sent to Governments on major achievements and obstacles in implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome of the special session. Members of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues may wish to urge Governments to include information and data on the situation of indigenous women and girls in their responses to the questionnaire.

The expert guidance and recommendations of the Permanent Forum on the issue of indigenous women will provide critical input to the work of the Commission on the Status of Women and the Division for the Advancement of Women. We have before us an important window of opportunity to ensure that the issues and challenges facing indigenous women are reflected and addressed in the review and appraisal process. This opportunity should be utilized to underline the importance of empowering indigenous women and promoting gender equality within indigenous communities around the world.

I wish the Permanent Forum a successful third session and I pledge the support of the Division for the Advancement of Women for your efforts to maintain systematic attention to indigenous women and girls in your work.

Thank you.