



## ONLY EIGHT STATES CLOSE GENDER GAP, SAYS UNIFEM

by Thalif Deen

United Nations, 5 Jun 2000 (IPS) - The international community has fallen far short of its commitments to empower women and achieve gender equality, according to a new report released by the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

Of the 188 member states, only eight have successfully met global agreements to achieve gender equality in secondary education enrolment, and at least a 30% share of women's seats in parliament during the last decade.

Seven out of the eight countries are from the industrial world: Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. The only country from the developing world is South Africa.

While the United States has achieved 100% girls' enrolment, it has only achieved a 12% share of women's seat in the US Congress, ranking 10 out of the 24 industrial nations.

"UNIFEM is urgently calling upon governments, international financial institutions and corporations to renew their commitments to women's economic status in the face of new constraints and opportunities posed by globalisation," says UNIFEM Executive Director Noeleen Heyzer of Singapore, who is also the chief architect of the new report.

"We need to learn from countries where women have achieved 30% of seats in parliament and participate in key decision-making, particularly in the realm of government expenditures and the formulation of economic policy," she notes.

The 164-page study, described as the first of a new UNIFEM biennial report and titled "Progress of the World's Women", is one of the most comprehensive and up-to-date publications on the empowerment of women worldwide.

Released to coincide with the weeklong UN Special Session on Women beginning Monday, the study assesses women's progress using three indicators: gender equality in secondary education enrolment; an increase in women's seats in parliament; and women's share of paid employment.

The Special Session, also called Beijing-Plus-Five, will review the 1995 Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. UNIFEM has been supporting and funding several innovative programmes of governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other actors to implement the Beijing Platform. "There is still a long way to go before the promise of the Beijing Platform for Action is fulfilled," Heyzer says, "This raises the need for greater accountability, calling for more concentrated attention to three areas: targets and indicators that are needed to track progress, individuals and institutions to be held accountable, and measures that need to be taken towards accelerating progress for women."

The study singles out Eastern Europe as the region which has suffered the most dramatic decreases of women's seats in parliament. "This is most likely linked to the deterioration of economic conditions there and the dismantling of quota systems," says Diane Elson, Co-ordinator of the report, and Professor of Development Studies at the University of Manchester, England.

"Household income inequality has also increased there, suggesting a growing gap between rich and poor women," she notes.

Elson says that many women employed part-time or through temporary work receive lower wages, limited career prospects and fewer employment rights than those with full-time jobs. Though the quantity of jobs may

have increased, the quality of women's work has not, she argues.

"Women still contribute 70% of the total devoted time to unpaid care work, providing care to their families and communities. This compares to men who contribute only 30% of their time spent on such work," she adds.

Moreover, the level of women's employment fell in many countries of Eastern Europe during the transition to market economies. From 1985 to 1997, women's employment fell by 40% in Hungary, 31% in Estonia, 33% in Latvia, 24% in Lithuania, 21% in Russia, 16% in Slovenia, 12% in the Czech Republic and 13 percent in Poland.

The study shows that the largest increases in women's share of paid employment in industry and services (about 15 percent or more) were in Italy (23-38); Portugal (30-46); Slovenia (34-49); and Sri Lanka (24-44).

Heyzer says that in times of economic transition -- when state-run businesses privatise and a market economy is ushered in -- women and girls often pay the price, especially when services such as day care and health are cut back. A large proportion of work that women perform is often invisible to economic decision-makers, particularly women's unpaid work caring for families and communities, and the informal sector labour of street vendors and home-based workers, she adds.

The study is critical of the fact that global agreements made in the last decade to advance women's progress have not included targets relating to women's economic equality or to women's poverty, but have focused instead on gender equality in educational enrolment and women-specific health targets.

UNIFEM has recommended the adoption of globally agreed goals specific to women's economic progress, including ending women's disproportionate presence among the poor by 2015, and raising women's share of administrative and managerial positions to at least 30 percent by 2005 and to at least 50% by 2015.

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