Human Rights Council 26th Session

Annual full day discussion on Women’s Rights
The Impact of Gender Stereotypes
on the Recognition and Enjoyment of Women’s Human Rights

Opening remarks of
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Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to open the Human Rights Council's annual full-day discussion of women's rights. This is a topic of fundamental importance to every society, and indeed every person. Recognition of the equal dignity and freedom of women and men is vital to the enjoyment of all human rights – and it is also the only way to ensure that every community can count on the talents and skills of every individual, in the pursuit of economic, social and political development.

Yet in many societies, patterns of behaviour indicate a tenacious belief that women do not have full rights to free choice. The outrageous recent kidnapping of more than 200 schoolgirls in northern Nigeria is yet another in a long line of attacks on women’s rights and dignity premised on deep stereotypes regarding women’s proper roles. I have urged the authorities, in the strongest possible terms, to take action to ensure the safety of these girls and that their abductors are punished. But around the world, millions of other girls their age are not permitted to seek higher education simply because they are female: Millions of young women are forbidden to choose whether, when and whom to marry; how to earn a living; and whether to have children, and how many. Their range of political, social, economic and cultural options is far more limited than those of men.

**Gender stereotypes**

In the past few decades, almost every State has acknowledged women’s equality – in principle. Yet it is rarely fully realised. One problem is a lack of real commitment on the part of decision-makers. But another obstacle stems from deep-seated gender stereotypes about women’s supposedly proper attributes, characteristics or place in the family and society. Such beliefs can be apparently benign – such as that women are by nature more nurturing – or overtly negative: for example, the notion that women are irrational. But these long-held notions can block a community's ability to even conceptualise women's free and full enjoyment of human rights, and this is an important human rights concern. Thus the CEDAW Committee has stated that States Parties are required to modify or transform “harmful gender stereotypes” and “eliminate wrongful gender stereotyping.”
Effects of harmful gender stereotypes

A gender stereotype is harmful when it limits women’s – or men’s – ability to develop their talents, pursue careers, and above all, make choices about their lives. The belief that women can only realise their full nature in motherhood may lead parents to refuse certain forms of education. The belief that all women are physically weak, or by nature lack certain skills, may lead to their exclusion from specific jobs. Such ideas about what women should or should not do – or be – are fundamentally unjust. Every woman is a unique individual, with her own desires, skills and talents.

Cultural attitudes and gender ideologies frequently regard women as subordinate to men, or dictate that men should control women. These attitudes may be so widely and deeply held within the community that they are almost invisible – except in their effects. For they perpetuate discrimination, violence and humiliation. Thus the traditional notion that a wife is the sexual property of her spouse results in failure to prosecute rape by a husband as a criminal offense.

Female genital mutilation and child marriage are particularly devastating examples of the damage that can be done by gender stereotyping. Both these practices, which are being discussed during this Human Rights Council session, may be perceived by the child’s parents as beneficial – to establish, demonstrate or preserve her allegedly true nature as chaste, submissive, and pure. Yet they are extremely damaging to the victims’ rights.

Women continue to be treated as dependents or minors by many legal systems, both formal and informal, including traditional and religious ones. According to the World Bank, which surveys the laws of 143 countries, at least 9 countries still have laws that require women to obey their husbands. In specific areas, such as women’s access to essential health services, many more States require third-party authorization by a husband, father or brother. But even when the law itself is free of overt discrimination, gender stereotypes create tremendous obstacles to women’s pursuit of justice, particularly in cases related to gender-based violence, marriage and family, economic opportunities, and women and adolescent girls’ sexual and reproductive health. Thus, for instance, the ancient quote “Hell hath no fury.
like a woman scorned” still finds favour – yet courts treat the fury of a man scorned as a mitigating factor that exonerates men who batter or kill their wives or partners.

Ending gender stereotyping

International human rights law obliges States to eliminate discrimination against women in all areas of their lives. Article 5 of the CEDAW Convention requires State Parties to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, in order to eliminate prejudices and customs that are based on the idea of the inferiority or superiority of either sex, or on stereotyped roles for men and women.

Evidence of women’s prior sexual conduct should be inadmissible in rape and sexual violence cases, as provided by the Rules of Evidence of the International Criminal Court, unless the defence establishes relevance. And legal requirements that adult women request the permission of a male relative in order to travel, to work, to seek an education – and even before obtaining medical treatment – are human rights violations, rooted in the belief that women are not equal to men.

Human rights mechanisms, particularly CEDAW, have recommended measures that States can take to address gender stereotyping. Gender stereotypes should be eliminated from education materials. Public education campaigns, in the media and elsewhere, should foster respect for women’s equality and dignity. Programmes should be established to encourage girls to pursue education and employment in non-traditional fields. Steps should be taken to ensure impartial and objective investigations into allegations of violence. A number of temporary special measures can help to eliminate occupational segregation based on gender stereotypes.

I am confident that our panel today will provide an opportunity to share promising practices that can address some of these challenges. I particularly look forward to your discussion of measures that can be taken to transform the harmful stereotypes that are at the base of so much injustice across the world. Thank you.