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**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against
Women**

44th session, Geneva, 20 July 2009, 10 am

United Nations Headquarters, New York,

Conference Room 2

Opening address by

Ms. Jessica Neuwirth

**Director of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
in New York**

**To the forty-fourth session of the Committee on the Elimination
of Discrimination against Women**

**Madam Chairperson,
Distinguished members of the Committee,
Ladies and gentlemen,**

On behalf of the Secretary-General and the High Commissioner for Human Rights, it gives me great pleasure to open the forty-fourth session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and welcome you to the United Nations Headquarters in New York.

Before turning to your work during this session, allow me to bring to your attention a number of **important new developments** of interest to the Committee that have taken place since your last session in January of this year.

The **Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** met in Geneva for the first time from 23 to 27 February 2009. Given that the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is rich with references to women, I am certain that you will find future collaboration between the two Committees extremely valuable. As you know, among the principles set out in article 3 of the Convention are non-discrimination and equality between men and women, while article 6 specifically concerns women and disabilities.

On 20 and 23 February the Human Rights Council convened its tenth special session to debate the impact of the world financial and economic crises on human rights. As you may be aware, the Council has adopted a resolution which invites special procedures and treaty bodies to

consider within their respective mandates the impacts of the crises on the realisation of human rights. As requested by this resolution, the High Commissioner for Human Rights participated in a **Conference** on the World Financial and **Economic Crisis** and its Impact on Development on 25 June 2009. I am aware that your Committee has adopted, at its forty-third session, a statement on the international financial crisis, and that you pay particular attention to its impact in your recommendations to States parties.

As you know, the Durban Review Conference took place between 20 and 24 April 2009 in Geneva, and was attended by your Chairperson, Ms. Naéla Gabr. The Review Conference served as a catalyst to fulfill the promises of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action agreed at the 2001 World Conference through reinvigorated actions, initiatives and practical solutions. The outcome document expresses concern at the persistence of discrimination against women and girls on the grounds of race, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance and stresses the urgent need to combat such discrimination by prioritizing the development of a systematic and consistent approach to identifying, evaluating, monitoring and eliminating such discrimination against women and girls, in accordance with the Durban **Declaration and Programme of Action**. The document stresses, in the context of multiple discrimination, that we need to treat all forms of violence against women and violence against children as criminal offences, punishable by law, as well as to provide access to just and effective remedies. It also highlights the importance of providing specialized assistance and rehabilitation to victims, including medical and psychological assistance and effective counselling. I am confident that you, as other treaty bodies, will consider

modalities of ensuring that follow-up to this Conference is taken into consideration in the course of your work.

The fifth session of the **Universal Periodic Review** took place from 4 to 15 May and considered 16 states, bringing the total number of countries reviewed to 80. I am aware that you also study the outcomes of the UPR for countries under your review.

I would also like to inform you that the eleventh session of the Human Rights Council was held from 2 to 19 June 2009. In its resolution 6/30 adopted on 14 December 2007, the Council reaffirmed the principle of gender equality and the need for a comprehensive approach to the promotion and protection of the human rights of women. It also decided to incorporate into its programme of work sufficient and adequate time, at minimum an annual full-day meeting, to discuss the human rights of women, including measures that can be adopted by States and other stakeholders, to address human rights violations experienced by women. The Annual full-day Meeting provided for in that resolution took place on 4 June 2009 and focused on Equality before the Law. Ms. Patten participated in that meeting and I am sure that she will be providing you with a more detailed account of the event during the course of this session.

At its last session, the Council adopted resolution 11/2 on “Accelerating Efforts to Eliminate All Forms Of Violence Against Women” which stresses that States have the obligation to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms of women and girls and must exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate, prosecute and punish the perpetrators of violence against women and girls and to

provide protection to the victims, and that failure to do so violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Council also adopted resolution 11/3 on **Trafficking in persons, especially women and children, which inter alia urges governments** to take appropriate measures to address the root factors that encourage trafficking in persons for prostitution and other forms of commercialized sex, forced marriages and forced labour, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs, including by strengthening existing legislation or by considering the enactment of anti-trafficking legislation and the adoption of national plans of action. Also of relevance to your work, the Council adopted resolution 11/6 on the Right to Education, and resolution 11/8 on **Preventable maternal mortality and morbidity and human rights which are also included in your files.**

As you may also know, on 18 June 2009, the Human Rights Council appointed Ms. Rashida Manjoo as Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its Causes and Consequences. I am aware that you have taken advantage of the Committee's move to Geneva to initiate a more institutionalized collaboration with her predecessor, Ms. Yakin Erturk. I am confident that you will build on this and work closely with Ms. Manjoo, as this would be beneficial for both your mandates, in particular in respect of follow-up to your respective recommendations.

You will also be pleased to know that the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has adopted its General Comment N. 20 on Non-discrimination at its last session, in May 2009. This important document, which is available in your file, is extremely relevant to your work as it describes States parties obligations to guarantee the principle of

non discrimination, and seeks to identify prohibited grounds of discrimination, including on the basis of sexual orientation.

I would also like bring to your attention a recent lecture given by the High Commissioner at the University of Western Cape, South Africa, entitled "The Agenda for the Promotion of the Rights of Women in the Next Decade" which is also available in your files. In her statement, the High Commissioner recalled the importance of CEDAW, as well as the considerable influence which the Convention and its Optional Protocol have had on laws, policies and jurisprudence at national level. The High Commissioner recalls however that women continue to suffer multiple forms of discrimination and that to fully tap into women's potential, the next decade should be devoted to implementing women's rights, to find practical and effective ways to relieve their suffering, but also—and more profoundly—to redressing the injustice that hampers, belittles and suppresses their contribution.

On 18 December 2009, the international community will celebrate the **thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women** by the United Nations General Assembly and the tenth anniversary of the Optional Protocol to the Convention. To mark this anniversary, the United Nations system is providing support for country and regional CEDAW anniversary events which will culminate on 3 December 2009 with a global event to give recognition to outstanding leadership and national progress, bringing national governments, members of the CEDAW Committee, women's human rights non-governmental organizations and the United Nations system together on the occasion of the Convention's anniversary.

Details of the specific elements of this event will be provided to you later today by your Secretariat.

I would like to conclude by wishing you a very productive session and reiterate the great appreciation of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for your extremely valuable work. I am happy to offer the support of my Office during this period, and I hope that we will have the opportunity to meet more informally. I am of course available now for any questions or comments you may have. Thank you.
