

Democracy and Gender Equality Roundtable
4 May 2011
North Lawn Building, UN Headquarters, New York

Opening Remarks by Vidar Helgesen,
Secretary-General, International IDEA

Mr Chair,

Madam Helen Clark, Administrator of the UNDP

Madam Madam Bachelet, Executive Director of UN Women

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This Roundtable forms part of a series of roundtables which International IDEA has organized with UN partners: on democracy and the three UN pillars of development, peace and security, and human rights. The issue of democracy and gender equality is so important to the mandate and operations of the United Nations that it merits a fourth roundtable looking at how the UN can further strengthen its actions in this field. I am very pleased with the strong partnership we have had with the UN family in organizing this meeting.

Democracy and gender equality are two of the most universally accepted notions in today's world. Yet, democracy's great promise is often not translated into a meaningful reality for citizens. And gender equality is even further from being meaningfully realized.

As we all know, gender is being addressed and needs to be addressed in the development discourse, the peace and security discourse, and the human rights discourse. Yet I will argue that no discussion is more important for gender equality than that of democracy and gender. Why? Because it is about power and influence over the very political processes that in turn determine development, peace and security, and human rights.

The issue of political empowerment of women is not about women as a target group for development, or women as a group requiring special human rights protection. It is about women and men as actors in improving the quality of democracy and democratic politics with beneficial outcomes for all citizens.

IDEA's working definition of democracy has two elements:

- Popular control over public decision-making
- Equality between citizens in the exercise of that control.

On this basis, democracy can not be fully realized unless there is equality between citizens, and that includes equality between women and men. We are rightly celebrating each time a woman is elected President or Prime Minister of a country. But we need to appreciate that this is not always an indication of equality in society: it may at times be a degree of equality at the elite levels which controls political life in a country. I once asked a then opposition leader, now Head of State, about the weak representation of women in the country's political life. He responded by saying that "Well I have tried to convince both my wife and my daughter to get engaged in politics but they refuse." The elite perspective might be laughable, but the realities behind it are not.

Democracy will also not be realized if there is numerical equality but not popular control over public decision-making. Having 50% women in a country's parliament does not produce a true democracy if that parliament has virtually no power of control and oversight.

So gender equality does not democracy make. And democracy does not gender equality make. But when both principles of popular control and equality between citizens are realized, then democracy and gender equality are both maximized – and society is on a much better path to development, security and human rights.

The unfolding events in the Arab Region present a live challenge in making both these principles come alive. The democratic revolution was exactly about

the call for popular control over public decisions – and the display of equality between citizens of all kinds was highly impressive – including the equal participation of women and men.

Sustaining that equality of participation will be a challenge. I happened to be in Cairo on the International Women's Day on 8 March, when women activists at Tahrir Square were asked by former fellow male demonstrators to go home. A newspaper columnist had a piece on the same day in which he commented that with the dissolution of Parliament women MPs had now reverted to domestic bliss. He also noted that their husbands would be very skeptical about once again spending so much money on their wives running for office. As so often, we see entrenched views about the respective responsibilities of women and men. Media is often, too often, a channel for cementing such views. The role of the media has been identified as critical for democracy as well as for the gendered visions they produce and reproduce. The impact of the new media should also be assessed given the role they are playing in many democratic transitions around the globe.

All actors supporting democracy and gender equality need to face the realities of entrenched views and a political culture which needs to change. But that political culture needs to change not only for the sake of gender equality but for the sake of inclusive and participatory democracy at large. Changing the political culture is a very long term endeavour but, as we have seen in recent months, the impulse of democracy is strong and can produce surprisingly quick action.

While we talk about changing political culture, we need also to be action-oriented and be aware that, also in democracy, the Devil is often in the detail (and even though I try to avoid gender bias, I must admit in my mental universe the Devil is a man).

What do I mean with the devil in the detail?

- As an example, the electoral system matters. There are electoral systems that are more or less likely to produce better gender equality.

Our global comparative experience tells us that “First Past The Post” is less likely to get women elected than proportional systems.

- Quota systems matter. They can be voluntary or binding but they matter. Or rather, they can matter. Some quota systems are not effective – and it is also important how quota systems are combined with the electoral system.
- Political parties matter more than most. The democracy building agenda needs to target the strengthening of political parties as key actors for democratic development. At the same time we need to be aware that parties are too often the main gatekeepers against women in politics. This is evident through party nomination procedures and political financing arrangements, for example. Internal barriers to women within political parties need to be addressed in order to achieve the necessary number of women in legislatures, which is a key indicator of Millennium Development Goal 3.

Addressing these issues is critical and depends on significant changes in the political culture that permeates traditional politics. The UN system should contribute to such changes in its democracy support work.

The possibility of sharing experience on a cross-regional basis and the potential of drawing non-prescriptive, evidence-based recommendations in support of country efforts in such areas will be of great relevance to the debate of this Roundtable. I am very pleased by the quality of participants that have accepted to give their contributions at this meeting.

Let me conclude by stressing that International IDEA stands committed to deepening its partnership with the United Nations family and others for the advancement of gender equality as a means to building stronger and more sustainable democracies.

Thank you.