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Opening speech to the First EI World Women's Conference

Introduction

Dear sisters and brothers,

let me say how encouraged I am already by the collective energy and vision that you are all bringing to our Conference proceedings. We have come here from different places and struggles; but we share a common purpose for transformative change, for gender justice, for equality. As women teachers and trade unionists, we are at the forefront of the movement for change in our homes, our classrooms, our unions, our communities and societies. Today we shall devote time together in conversations about what we have accomplished so far, what are the challenges we face, and how we can embark resolutely on the move for equality.

The history of women's struggles for justice

Recorded history tends to be the story of men, and events around wars, conquests and capitulations, warlords, Kings and Emperors. A starting point to achieve gender equality must be a change in existing dominant histories, power patterns and the attitudes they perpetuate. We need to record the histories of our heroines, great women who influenced history; their roles, their struggles and their leadership. And new heroines are emerging; stories of women who made a significant difference in their lifetime, at family, community, and national levels.

We know that there were communities of women, from nuns to witches, artists to revolutionaries who have empowered women around them, empowered women collectively, changing the lives of women who had no voice, who were subjugated and powerless.

We also know that their struggles took great courage and perseverance. Changing existing power patterns and cultures is never easy; because that

means changing attitudes that are ingrained and transmitted; imposed, absorbed, and practised, becoming the norm for the next generation, unless challenged by enlightened change-makers.

It is for this reason that the movement of suffragettes which started in England in the late 19th century is so exciting and inspiring! It was led by educated women, but was, interestingly, one of the first movements to break through class divisions: women from all walks of life joined. It was not just about gaining the political vote – it was also about being respected in the home: addressing issues of alcohol use, violence; joint decision-making about family earnings and spending; the division of care-giving responsibilities; respect for women's voices, their right to testify during court-cases, and to speak publicly, especially during political events – all these issues came up, and still come up, in many countries, cultures, families and organizations in the world today.

Inspired by her English sisters and supported by a powerful and enlightened group of men, Kate Sheppard in New Zealand was the first in the world to achieve the vote for women: as long ago as 1896! It will be interesting to hear from you about your women's stories, and when the vote for women was achieved in your country. I believe in Europe, Switzerland was the last, in 1973.

Women's achievement of the right to vote was reached at different moments in different places. For example, in South Africa, white women in 1930; black women in 1994. In Australia, non-Indigenous people gained the vote in the early twentieth century, whereas shamefully Indigenous People only achieved the right to vote, in 1967. The fight for inclusive gender justice has been long and painful in many places.

In India, recent legislation includes a 33% reservation or quota for women in local bodies, which has resulted in about 10 million women holding office. A Bill to make a 33% reservation (or quota) in the national parliament is currently being debated.

I use the right to vote as an important symbol of the right to participate, to have voice and autonomy, and therefore to enjoy equality, dignity and respect. But our struggle continues on many fronts. And for some women, progress needs to be speeded up: Aboriginal, Roma; poor and vulnerable people; marginalized women, too often cast out and forced to migrate to other parts of the world.

When we shift attention to taking stock of the Status of Women, we cannot fail to see a mismatch between international standards and actual practice.

In the post world war era, significant advances have been made in the adoption of norms for human rights, democracy and gender equality. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was agreed in 1948, and has been ratified by all countries.

In addition, many new international agreements and commitments have been made, most notably, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979), which defines discrimination as a violation of universal rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) places obligations on governments to ensure free primary education, quality education, and respect for children and youth up to the age of 18 years.

UN Resolutions, such as 1325 on the role of women in peace and security are vital for ensuring that the perpetrators of sexual violence are prosecuted and brought to justice.

They must be urgently applied in conflict situations such as Darfur and the DRC.

It is indeed a sobering thought to compare these great and global normative standards to the sad reality of the situation of women and girls in many countries today.

The decade of the UN Conferences – the 1990s – helped to transform the women's movement, giving much legitimacy to women's issues such as social development, as well as human and reproductive rights. This provided the arena that spurred many women present here today to local action. From Jomtien in 1990, Cairo in 1994, Beijing in 1995 and Dakar in 2000, each new conference elaborated on the role of gender equality in education and in society. The Beijing Platform for Action, for example, outlined a number of actions for governments and civil society to pursue within the field of education, in order to secure women's rights to education.

These inter-linkages between education and gender equality are an important focus of our discussions here, as we explore how our engagement in these areas within the trade union movement will help to make a difference in the lives of women and girls. These Conferences culminated in the global endorsement of EFA (Education for All), and the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals).

How do we measure progress against the backdrop of adopted covenants, standards and policies, and technological advancement? And does progress always help women?

Let's look at a few articles of the Declaration of Human Rights for a moment.

- *All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.*
- *Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.*
- *No one shall be held in slavery or servitude.*

It is estimated that in India and China, 2.7 million female foetuses are aborted each year. Is access to new medical technologies such as ultra sound helping to achieve gender equality? Statistics tell us that, for example, access to pre-natal ultra sound has resulted in termination of unwanted pregnancies of the girl child - one of the worst forms of gender violence and discrimination.

Girls and daughters are too often considered to have lower economic and social value than boys and sons. Until there is a change in these attitudes and practices, new developments will not translate into progress for girls and women.

Trafficking – a new form of slavery and exploitation for economic gain is an urgent issue. Around 800,000 people are trafficked across national borders annually, with about 80 percent of them being women and girls, and mostly into commercial sexual exploitation.

Child marriages are still common in many countries. Statistics of sexual and physical violence among child brides range from one third to two thirds, but reach nearly 100% in some countries.

Three million girls are at risk of female genital mutilation, mainly in Africa.

Taking stock of the state of education of girls and women

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states “everyone has a right to education”. Yet more than 60 years after that Declaration was adopted at the United Nations, and just 5 years before the new target date for achievement of Education for All, there are still 72 million children of primary school age out of school. Nearly 60% of those are girls, and about the same number is unable to go on to secondary school or to pursue relevant vocational education. Indigenous, refugee and migrant children world-wide are at a much greater risk of missing out on quality education.

And the estimates are that if we continue the way we are now there will be 56 million children still out of school in 2015. Furthermore about three quarters of the approximately 700 million illiterate people in the world are women.

Research is overwhelmingly clear: there are bookcases full of evidence that the best way to ensure that girls and women can decide and negotiate successfully about their own minds, bodies, and lives is EDUCATION. An educated woman has significantly less reproductive or other health problems, fewer children, is less likely to be faced with child-mortality, suffers relatively less violence, and is more successful in participating in family, community and wider economic and political activities. An educated woman’s children are better nourished, more likely to attend school, and less likely to be HIV positive. At policy-level, if not always followed through in practice, governments and multinationals affirm that a dollar spent on educating girls is by far the most efficient and effective development dollar ever: not only for the women themselves, but also for the wider community and economy.

And yet, education remains grossly underfunded, and, as a result, under-resourced, not always accessible, and not always quality education.

Clearly then, despite the adoption of an impressive array of policies, and considerable improvements in the last decade, significant inequalities remain.

We must advocate for full implementation of existing legal frameworks, in order to ensure that women participate actively in economic, public and political life, and gain access to decent work.

However, legal frameworks, while essential, are not enough to guarantee gender justice for all women and girls. Real long term change will only occur when rights are recognized by governments and are accessible by all women, and when societal and cultural norms and attitudes which result in the subjugation of women and girls are changed.

Political and Economic Participation

Political participation of women has increased significantly. Expectations are that the 21st century will see further growth of women in leadership.

Equal pay for equal work is guaranteed in many countries, and while implementation is slow, it is certainly on governmental and corporate agendas.

Gender specific job segregation is changing. In many countries, girls are breaking through to tertiary and higher education in greater numbers, and in some, in greater numbers than their male counterparts. Clearly, when girls do gain access, they achieve.

Women are entering traditional male fields of medicine, law and engineering, science and technology – but we do not see them in the higher professional and managerial positions, in the high court, or on the board of directors. We do see young women entering these fields; but we also see them leaving. What accounts for this trend? Is it attitudinal, or do child rearing and family responsibilities constitute a barrier to staying in the job and continuing the career path? More investigation is warranted.

So what does this mean for us?

As Women Trade Unionists as well as Educators, we know that there is still a way to go before we have achieved gender justice in our unions and in our schools.

But as I said last night we also know that education unions have a critical role to play in its achievements.

Let me reflect on my own experiences.

When I commenced teaching in the 1970's in Australia the working life of a woman teacher was far different from what it is for a young woman beginning her teaching career in 2011.

No maternity leave benefits, no superannuation or pension benefits for married women teachers (in the belief that her husband will always provide!), no access to permanent part-time work, a promotion system which directly discriminated against women, no protections or for that matter, no

recognition, of sexual harassment and its impact. In fact, the teaching service was constructed to suit the working lives of men.

How different it is today for a young woman beginning teaching in 2011 in Australia. - she enters a teaching profession which provides paid maternity leave and family leave, permanent part time employment, employment opportunities which enable child rearing and family responsibilities without loss of job, promotion, superannuation benefits and so on. And just as importantly allows for leave provisions for men teachers to also take on their family responsibilities.

And these changes have largely come about because of the action of education unions, led by women activists, some of whom are in the room here today, and with the support of committed men.

It is my hope that at this Conference we will challenge each other constructively to increase our level of understanding and our level of leadership within our unions and within our education systems.

It is my hope that we will undertake initiatives aimed at connecting with the new UN Women structures. It is my hope that we will strategise better with other global and national social movements.

I look forward to this conference pushing the envelope and provoking us to be innovative and strategic - engaging with young people and their energies and social networks, succeeding in having our male colleagues make space, move away, support and encourage the rise of women leaders.

I look forward to us being strong leaders, supportive of each other, recognizing the pressures each one of us is facing in combining our family with our professional lives, and our union lives, sometimes facing power struggles within our own schools and unions.

We are in a position to stimulate change, to achieve transformation. We are in the right area of work: Education; and we are in the right organizational framework: Trade Unions. It is our mission to fight for the quality of our education systems in policy and practice, for the strength of our unions – and for Gender Justice within Education for all.

Reverting to the longer timeline with which I started, we have certainly already come from far, and have achieved much. All of us here have a challenge, to measure how well we are able to improve the condition of women's and girls' lives, particularly those who live far away from us, whom we do not know, but whose lives will be shaped by our actions.

Now we must inspire ourselves and each other to reach our goal – in our workplaces, classrooms and communities, within our own unions, within our own lives, and within Education International.

We are on the Move for Equality!