

Press Release

UNIFEM Calls for Stronger International Support for Women's Participation in Peace Processes

For immediate releaseDate: 18 July 2005

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United Nations, New York — The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) called on the international community today to recognize women's efforts to prevent and resolve conflict in their communities, and to strengthen support for women's inclusion as full and equal participants in formal peace processes.

UNIFEM's regional programme director for East and Horn of Africa, Nyaradzai Gumbonzvanda, speaking at a press conference, said that although women often play a leadership role in their communities during and after conflict, they were too often left out of formal peace negotiations and agreements. "Women's roles are often undervalued or ignored, despite the fact that it is their right to participate on equal terms with men in all governance and decision-making processes. Formal peace negotiations that leave out half the population have limited hope of popular support."

"There is certainly an increased international awareness of the gender dimensions of conflict, spurred in part by the adoption of Security Council resolution 1325, and in part by the efforts of governments, UN bodies and civil society to implement the

resolution," said Joanne Sandler, deputy director of UNIFEM. "But awareness is not enough. As we approach the five-year anniversary of 1325 in October, what's needed is stronger support for women's participation in all efforts to promote and maintain peace and security," she added.

While a few women have been able to participate in different capacities over the past decade, it is still rare for women to be involved alongside men in every stage of the peace process, including the implementation of peace agreements. Where women have gained access to negotiations, they have made valuable contributions.

In Somalia, during the Djibouti peace talks in 2000, only clans — five of them — were recognized as legitimate participants at the peace table. Women, excluded from the five clans, mobilized to form a "sixth clan," which was eventually accepted as an equal participant in the high-level peace talks. Their presence at the negotiations led to the Federal Charter requiring that a minimum of 12 per cent of National Assembly seats go to women.

"We had to think out of the box," said Asha Hagi Amin, newly appointed MP and founder of NGO Save Somali Women and Children, describing how women organized across clan borders to form what became not only a "multi-clan," but a clan that for the first time represented women from all over the country. "As women we had no role in the traditional clan structure, so we had no right to represent our own clans and therefore were shut out of the peace process. Since we were not treated as full members of our individual clans, we refused to rally behind them, and chose instead to form our own — to represent the voice of women, and more importantly

the voice of peace. During the Djibouti peace talks, only men were allowed inside the big tent where the negotiations were being held. So we stood outside demanding to participate until they had to let us in. I had the honour of representing the sixth clan, and for the first time I sat together next to the men as a full and equal participant."

As current negotiations in Somalia's peace process continue, women are playing a crucial role, working among different clans and militias to advocate for peace and non-violence so that Mogadishu remains a safe place for the talks to continue.

Women's networks, with their extensive local, and increasingly, regional reach, are key allies in building and sustaining vital public support for ongoing peace processes. Advocacy efforts by women's civil society groups can be instrumental to initiating formal peace negotiations, maintaining public support for their continuation until a peace accord is signed, and then assisting in its implementation.

Over the last five years, UNIFEM has been supporting and documenting the critical role that women play in promoting peace-building and conflict prevention worldwide. UNIFEM has provided assistance to women as they conduct advocacy, awareness-raising and peace education, support efforts to dispose of small arms, secure justice and psychosocial assistance for survivors of gender-based violence, and develop gender-based early warning indicators at the grassroots level — all with the explicit goal of preventing the emergence or recurrence of violent conflict. The Fund has also supported national and regional women's networks to build a "culture of peace" in areas where there are no active or formal peace processes, such as the Southern Caucasus.

In that region, women's organizations in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan have mobilized to create a Regional Coalition — "Women for Peace" — in order to back women's efforts to build a "culture of peace" in their communities in the absence of a formal peace process. Sevil Asadova, representative of the Coalition, described the growing role of civil society in the region in creating an "enabling environment for peace." "An increasing number of NGOs, including several women's groups, recognized the need to work with their counterparts in the conflict zones. They took a brave step against public opinion and started reaching out to each other from opposite sides of the conflicts," she said. "Our regional coalition brings women together, across conflict and ethnic lines, to work on everyone's mutual issue — women's human rights. This has united us, and is helping us to build confidence and mutual trust with others. It is this people-to-people diplomacy that is laying the foundations for sustainable peace in our countries and our region," she added.