

Statement by Ms. Naéla Gabr, Chairperson of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, New York, 3 December 2009

Madam High Commissioner, Mr. Secretary-General, colleagues and friends

I am delighted to participate in today's celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption by the General Assembly of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. I thank the Secretary-General and the High Commissioner for marking this commemoration with us. I also thank the organizers who have worked so hard to convene this event which gives us an opportunity to see the practical effects the Convention has had on the lives of women in many parts of the world and reflect on its potential for the future.

The Convention was the outcome of the determination of international women's rights activists – with members inside and outside Government – to ensure that a comprehensive treaty setting out women's human rights and the obstacles to achieving their full implementation was at the centre of international human rights law. These activists also applied the pressure which led to the Convention's Optional Protocol, which was adopted by the General Assembly ten years ago.

By setting out the steps that States are required to take to eliminate discrimination against women and ensure their equality with men in the civil, political, social, economic and cultural spheres, the Convention is one of the first human rights treaties to incorporate the concepts of universality, indivisibility and interdependence of all human rights. It is also one of the first human rights treaties to bridge the concepts of human rights and development, in particular through requiring States parties to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against rural women and ensure that they participate in, and benefit from, rural development on an equal basis with men. But perhaps the Convention's greatest strength lies in its recognition of the importance of substantive equality for women, which requires not only formal legal equality, but equality in real terms, in order to eliminate discrimination. The Convention constitutes a proactive code for the advancement of women through this, and also through its recognition that laws, policies and practices can unintentionally result in the subordination of women.

By its adoption of the Convention, the General Assembly provided the international community with a powerful tool to transform the lives of women and girls. However, the effectiveness of this tool depended on its use by States parties, civil society, individual women and the committee established by the Convention.

Since it began its work of translating the groundbreaking approach of the Convention from aspiration to practice, Committee members have worked with competence, dedication, integrity and imagination. The Committee has gained the respect of States parties, raised the attention of the international community to women's human rights and established and reinforced alliances with civil society and women all over the world. Through its practical approach during dialogue with States parties, in concluding observations after consideration of reports and analysis of petitions and inquiries the Committee has become recognized as the legitimate and internationally respected voice for the human rights of women and girls. It has regarded the Convention as a living instrument which must remain relevant to the emerging concerns of women in all parts of the world. The Committee was the first international mechanisms to identify violence against women as a form of discrimination and a violation of human rights; it has led the way in recognizing that discrimination against women often has multiple aspects, such as age or disability; and has contributed to the understanding of temporary special measures aimed at levelling the playing field between women and men. I am proud to say that the Committee remains alive to new global challenges, adopting statements on issues such as discrimination against women in the context of natural disasters and climate change, as well as the economic and financial crisis. Most importantly, the Committee has sought to provide States with ideas and solutions and examples of best practices which will ensure that the Convention will benefit all women.

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Throughout its thirty years, the Convention has managed to capture the imagination of women worldwide and it has been used by many to transform their lives. It is accepted by most States and its principles have impacted on all parts of our societies – individuals, families and communities. It is clear there remains much more to be done,

but the Convention has set the standard, and the Committee will continue to strive to develop that standard so the full potential of its application at the national level is attained and all women will be free from all forms of discrimination.

Thank you