

Translation from the Swedish by the author.

International Women's Day 2012 at the Museum of History

Address by

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Princess Christina,
Mr. Minister of Finance,
Margareta Winberg, Chair of the Swedish National Committee for UN Women,
Esteemed Audience,

Many thanks for the invitation to speak at this manifestation!

The theme of this evening's program is *Women in North Africa – The Arab Spring: Women in democracy processes*. During the ten minutes at my disposal, I intend to focus on the latter element – Women in democracy processes, although I will obviously also touch upon the Arab Spring.

In fact, irrespective of what topic I am addressing these days – and they cover wide areas – I am reverting to the issue of empowerment of women.

There are several reasons for this. A starting point is the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948.¹

The Preamble of the Declaration mentions “fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women.”

The first article states that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." And Article 16 deals with the right to marry and found a family.

In light of tonight's theme it is of particular importance to point to Article 21, whose three paragraphs read:

- (1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
- (2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.
- (3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

¹ <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>.

But the point of departure might just as well be in what is known as common sense.

In general it can be said, first, that women who are not allowed to participate on equal conditions in society remain an untapped resource. There is a direct relationship between the status of women in a society and that society's level of development. A moment ago Finance Minister Anders Borg pointed emphatically precisely to these relationships.

Another important aspect is the population issue. When the UN was established in 1945, we were about two billion people on Earth. Today we are seven billion, and in the middle of the century we will be 9,3 billion. The curve will flatten out at about this level towards the end of the century.

One question that must be asked is, however, whether the Earth can support such a large population if it is to live at the level that we do here in the West. And who can question other peoples' right to raise their living standards in the same way? An obvious conclusion is that women must also have the right to be involved in decisions concerning family planning.

Against this general background, and with reference to the quotes from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it goes without saying that women must also be able to influence political life.

Since the focus is on the Arab Spring, one must ask the question about the status of women in the Muslim world. I know that this matter is sensitive, but that must not prevent the issue from being subject to a serious discussion.

I have had the privilege of discussing the issue with many Muslim friends. The question that I have asked, not least against the background of our own history, is if the rules that apply to women in the Muslim world are based on religion or tradition. I remember in particular one occasion in Alexandria a few years ago. After a lecture I put this question to the audience, all learned men – lawyers and social scientists.

An intense discussion ensued, but because it was conducted in Arabic, I could not understand what was said. However, suddenly all fell silent and one of the participants explained on his own behalf and on behalf of the others that it was really a matter of tradition.

The situation was the same in our country. We must not forget that it took until 1921 before women were allowed to participate in elections to our parliament. Married women now came of age and also became eligible for election to parliament. Still much remains to be done here.

But what can one then do to strengthen the position of women, you ask yourself.

One obvious answer is of course that it is important that women organize themselves – join political parties and associations of various kinds. When I was a child, I learned that my grandmother Edit after World War I had joined one of the organizations behind today's manifestation – Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. In June 1918, she had lost her husband sea captain Pontus Valdemar Norrman on the North Sea. A German torpedo had ended his life, and Edit was left alone with her three children.

It is also important that women and their organizations in every way support each other in efforts to empower women both nationally and across borders.

As former Legal Counsel of the UN, it is natural for me to point to the agency that was established within the UN system in 2010 to strengthen the position of women. I am thinking of UN Women, which was formed through the merger of several existing agencies.² UN Women Sweden has the main responsibility for our manifestation today.

UN Women is to support inter-governmental bodies such as the UN Commission on the Status of Women when it is to formulate policies, global standards and norms.³

Incidentally, the Commission meets in these days – 27 February to 9 March – in New York. One of the issues that are high on the agenda this year is how to engage young women and men, girls and boys, to advance gender equality.⁴

Time does not allow me to go into detail in these issues. But I want to refer specifically to a contextually very interesting collaboration between UN Women and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). A short address that the Executive Director of UN Women Michelle Bachelet gave on 29 February this year at a joint meeting between the two can be recommended.⁵

The Inter-Parliamentary Union, where, incidentally, the Swede Anders B. Johnsson is the Secretary General since several years, is an international organization of national parliaments which was established in 1889. Currently, the IPU has 159 members and 9 associate members. Compare with the UN which has 193 members.

The IPU is the venue for a world-wide parliamentary dialogue and works for peace and cooperation among peoples and for the establishment of a stable representative democracy.

The cooperation between the IPU and the UN is very important, especially when it comes to empowerment of women. I can recommend a visit to the Union's website, where there is a lot of information that focuses specifically on women's ability to participate in political life.⁶ Among other things, there is statistics showing how women are represented in the parliaments of the world. The latest table from 31 December 2011 shows that the Nordic countries are at the top with more than 42% while the Arab countries, the other extreme, end up at just over 10%.⁷

The reason that I have focused on the cooperation between the UN and the Inter-Parliamentary Union is that the two organizations have such central functions in relation to our subject today: Women in democratic processes.

But the democratic process is, of course, much wider than solely the representation in national parliaments. This process must spread through society at large.

² <http://www.unwomen.org/>.

³ <http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/>.

⁴ http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=E/CN.6/2012/1.

⁵ <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2012/2/women-s-equal-participation-fundamental-to-democracy-and-justice/>.

⁶ <http://www.ipu.org/english/home.htm>.

⁷ <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>.

Here it is natural to refer to the existence of elected assemblies at both regional and local levels. But in fact, the democracy process is about an understanding of society that must be imparted to people already at a young age. The subject must simply be part of their upbringing. This is precisely why we should welcome that the Commission on the Status of Women is now to focus on young people.

What is especially important is that young people engage in politics and in the non-governmental organizations, which is organizations of the kind that are behind today's event. As I understand it people within the political parties are concerned that the regrowth of new members among the youth does not meet expectations. This raises concerns.

In a vibrant democracy, non-governmental organizations and political parties have an extremely important role to play. In an established democracy one might not really appreciate how important this is. But in fact, the absence of a system in which people engage themselves in different ways is one of the biggest problems when it comes to establishing democracies in countries where there is no tradition in this field.

It is through these organizations, and not least the political parties that the general public can identify persons to represent them in a democratic process that finally chisels out the composition of the elected National Assembly. Herein is one of the biggest challenges in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

But herein is also a challenge for us in our country. The question I ask myself is how we can reach those young people who with plugged ears and their eyes firmly fixed on the screen of the cell phone wander around in town seemingly completely oblivious of the people around?

Finally, a few words about what can be done. And here I would particularly like to direct myself to men in positions where it is possible to influence the opportunity of women to participate in community work. I am referring not only to the public sector but also and not least to the business community. What is at issue is in fact quite simple. It can be summarized in two points: attitude and attention.

- Attitude in the sense that one must be clear about how important it is that women are allowed to contribute in different ways in society. Not least important is this for the atmosphere within the organization, within the company or within the agency – in short, in the workplace.

- Attention in the sense that in recruitment or in appointment of representatives of parties and organizations one ensures that there are also women among the candidates shortlisted.

Let me end with a little sunshine story which I am quite proud of.

When I joined the United Nations in 1994, the General Assembly had decided that there should be 50 % women in the departments within the Secretariat. I realized that I had only 34% women in the Office of Legal Affairs. At the level of director and above there was only 6% women. She was French and her name was Jacqueline.

I realized that it would take a long time to implement the decision of the General Assembly. My division managers were given the following instruction: (1) No woman is promoted just

because she is a woman but because she is the most competent. (2) Always a woman shortlisted in appointment matters.

When after ten years I left my position as Legal Counsel, the fifty per cent target had been achieved. This evening, I would in particular like to mention that among my most able lawyers were four women: an Iranian, a Saudi, an Israeli and a Moroccan.

How did this come about? The most effective tool in this process was probably a graphical presentation that I handed out to my division managers every quarter with steel in my eyes. The lines in the graph started at 66 % for men and 34% for women. The goal was “the embrace” when the lines would meet at 50 %.

This method can certainly be used elsewhere. Why not when it comes to strengthening the position of women in democratic processes?

Thank you for your attention!