

Keynote Address by H.E. Mr. Pieter Jozef Theofile Marres, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary and Permanent Representative to ESCAP, The Royal Netherlands Embassy

International Women's Day

United Nations International Women's Day Task Force

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Women, girls and human rights in the Dutch development cooperation and foreign policy

UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative, Ms. Gwi-Yeop Son,
Your Excellency, Ambassador Latha Reddy,
Deputy Executive Secretary of UNESCAP, Mr. Shigeru Mochida,
Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I am very honoured to be invited today to speak about the current Dutch development cooperation policy and the role of women within this policy.

WOMEN IN THE NETHERLANDS

I will take this opportunity to congratulate all women present here today. The battle that women have fought to obtain equal rights to man has been a hard and long one. I say 'has been' but I mean of course 'is' a hard one because I believe we can all agree that the battle is still ongoing. In my country the struggle started in the later part of the 19th century when the courageous women of the Dutch Association for Woman's Voting Rights took to the street to demand the right to vote. We have come a long way since then.

As you might know the Netherlands have a reputation of being liberal and ahead on social issues. In my country, single sex marriages are legal and there is a Labour Union for prostitutes. The percentage of women participating in higher level education is substantial, but also in the Netherlands the battle for equality between man and women is not yet over. Participation of women in top positions in the Netherlands, to name but one issue, is only 6,5%. Let me quote the former prime-minister of Great Britain Margaret Thatcher. Whatever you may think of her, she is a woman who can be very clear and frank using just a few words. She said, "You may have to fight a battle more than once to win it". And a lot of battles need to be fought still.

Our minister for Development Cooperation Mr. Bert Koenders, was awarded with a price by a women's rights advocacy group in the Netherlands called 'Women on Top'. This is a lobby group, whose members are highly educated and occupy important high managerial or administrative positions. They strive to have more women in top positions in the private as well as the public sector in the Netherlands. Mr. Koenders has been decorated for being the minister *Most Kindly Disposed Towards Women* in the year 2007. In his acceptance speech minister Koenders told the 'Women on Top' members that he was well aware of the problems and difficulties facing them and other women in regards to their professional careers. In other Western European countries the percentage of women occupying top

positions is far higher than in the Netherlands. One of the most important reasons is the fact that in my country, many women prefer to work part-time. Apart from that, the minister blamed, among other things, the lack of affordable day care centres. He then proceeded to outline his vision towards development aid and in that context he spoke of ‘Women on the Bottom’ as being among his main concerns.

FOREIGN AND DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION POLICY: HUMAN RIGHTS AND WOMEN AFFAIRS

Women are indeed a main target group for the policy makers at the ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague and the aid workers in the field. But different than before. Ten years ago, “Women in Development” and gender programmes were separately promoted. Nowadays, gender is expected to have become a so called cross cutting issue. It is integrated throughout our development strategy. We better understand the concept of gender and the differences of women and men on top, in the middle and on the bottom. We also acknowledge that different groups have different needs and concerns.

For example, Thai female civil servants who earn less salary than their male colleagues while performing the same job face totally different problems than Hmong refugee teenage girls. A Malay Thai woman in the South faces different problems than a Lao Thai in Isaan. If we would like our strategies to work, we will not succeed without making a clear analysis of the different groups of people involved. With this in mind, women are without doubt a top priority.

Since the new Dutch government came into office early last year human rights have, even more than before, become the cornerstone of our foreign policy as well as our development policy.

Human rights are a set of rules that guarantee people the right to be different, and ensure equality before the law. These rules oblige governments to protect their citizens from violence and ensure that all people enjoy equal opportunities. Human rights are the fundamental values on which democratic states and the rule of law are built: justice, equality, humanity and respect, solidarity. We want to work towards a society based on these values – not only for ourselves, but for others too. Everyone has a right to human dignity. It is this strong moral conviction that drives us to pursue a more active human rights policy. It is not just moral conviction that drives us though. This choice is also born out of a sense of reality and self-interest. Persistent violations of human rights undermine stability. The consequences – terrorism, international crime, forced migration are, in today’s world, no longer restricted to certain countries or regions, but can form a threat to the wider world as well.

Ever since the development of the universal declaration of human rights we found that the declaration needed further refining for specific groups in society. Different concerns are put forward by different groups in society. That is why the Convention of the Rights of the Child was developed as well as the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

In many parts of the world, women are prevented from functioning as fully-fledged members of society. The rights of women and girls are violated on a massive scale, whether in the form of discrimination at work, domestic violence or sexual abuse as a weapon of war.

WOMEN AND VIOLENCE

Political attention is needed to combat discrimination and violence against women. The Netherlands will work to move women's rights higher up the political agenda, in the EU-context, within the Council of Europe, at the UN, but also in bilateral contacts.

Violence against women is more than a violation of human rights. It is also a security issue. Over the last decade, violence against women has become endemic in conflict zones. It has become a weapon of modern warfare that specifically and structurally targets women.

Therefore, we first need to include women in our security strategies. This means that the Netherlands is investing more strongly in Security Sector Reform and in Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programmes in post-conflict countries. We want to ensure that violence against women does not continue after a conflict has ended. We need to train armies and soldiers; making them aware that violence against women is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. The Netherlands will allocate extra funding for Security Sector Reform, Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) and training programmes in fragile states. It already provided the Department of Peacekeeping Operations with funds to integrate a gender perspective into peace keeping operations.

Secondly, we need to create safe havens for women who suffered from violence and help them reintegrate in societies. We have to support women who set up their own networks for conflict prevention and dealing with trauma. And, even more so, we need to ensure that women get the place they deserve at the table in formal peace processes.

In that respect, the Netherlands supports the UN-agency programmes on Violence Against Women directly, the fund administered by UNIFEM.

Finally, we have to stop impunity. The grave violations of women's human rights, require the immediate attention of organisations like the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague and other relevant tribunals. The Security Council can play a role in this by referring

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