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**High-level event –
Women in development**

UNCTAD XIII

Held at the Qatar National Convention Centre, Doha, on 23 April 2012

Summary prepared by the UNCTAD secretariat

High-level event – Women in development

1. The purpose of the High-level Event on Women in Development was threefold: to take the gender issue to a new level of political prominence; to yield new insights into the relationship between macroeconomic policies, development and gender; and to launch a number of institutional initiatives to further the above objectives.
2. The event revolved around a high-profile, interactive round table organized into four substantive sessions. Session 1 helped highlight the multiple transmission channels through which gender relations affected macroeconomic outcomes and were affected by macroeconomic policy; session 2 looked at the relationship between gender, trade and poverty, including in the light of UNCTAD's research findings; session 3 yielded insights into agricultural production, environmental protection, food security, and the empowerment of rural women; and session 4 discussed policy options to translate women's educational gains into equal access to full employment and decent work, particularly in export-oriented sectors.
3. Opening remarks were made by Mr. Hamad bin Abdulaziz bin Ali Al-Kawari, Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage of Qatar, and President of UNCTAD XIII, by Sheikha Al Mayyasa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, and by Mr. Supachai Panitchpakdi, Secretary-General of UNCTAD. Ms. Zarrilli intervened on behalf of UNCTAD, and Mr. Alami on behalf of the Qatari teams in charge of the event. Twenty-two panellists participated in the panel discussions, representing national governments, academia, and the private sector. The panel discussions were followed by question-and-answer sessions.
4. The key policy issues discussed and recommendations raised are highlighted below:

I. Macroeconomic policy and trade: gender aspects

5. It was strongly emphasized that development was meaningful when there was a role for women. Without the involvement of women, development would be a "bird with one wing". It was acknowledged that there had been a degree of disconnection between economic growth and social inclusiveness. Income disparity, social inequality and exclusion had increased over the past decade, even in countries that had recorded high levels of economic growth and strong trade performance. It was generally felt that persistent patterns of inequality and exclusion represented a source of social instability and a drag on economic growth. It was stressed that the economic slowdown was no reason for lack of progress on this issue.
6. Some important qualifications were made: Firstly, it was recognized that economic growth would not automatically translate into equality and inclusive development. Particular attention was drawn to the role of enabling frameworks and policy tools to create opportunities for economic participation for women. Success stories were heard from Lesotho and Rwanda. Lesotho had made significant progress in closing the gender gap. Remarkably, the country had ranked ninth out of 135 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index for 2011, well ahead of many developed countries. The reconstruction of Rwanda since 1994 had been anchored on gender equality: there was a fundamental awareness that men and women should participate in society equally. These developments were largely credited to the country's domestic pro-women policies and strategies, and were based on a strong political resolve to promote gender equality. The critical success factor was the ability to translate this political commitment into action.

7. Challenging conventional wisdom, one discussant questioned whether a win-win outcome (to stimulate both economic growth and gender equality) could always be achieved. Some trade-offs were emphasized: in the context of liberalization, gender equality might have contradictory goals. For example, discriminatory low wages for women had kept export prices low and attracted foreign direct investment in many export-oriented economies. There had been evidence of this in Guatemala, Honduras, Malaysia and Thailand, and, more recently, in China. The challenge ahead was to raise women's wages and labour standards without negatively affecting export competitiveness.

8. Whatever the short-term benefits, it was acknowledged that an uncritical pursuit of market liberalization, and in particular of an export-led growth strategy based on cheap female labour, was not a sustainable means to achieve economic and social development in the long run. Gender equality in employment and wages needed to go hand in hand with a development strategy in which equality was compatible with economic growth. This required an innovative macroeconomic framework allowing for social costs and benefits to be fully factored into the economic analysis. In many ways, social expenditure should be treated as investment, raising standards of living and stimulating the economy. A change in mindset was advocated: rather than gender equality and poverty being conflicting goals, gender equality should be understood as a mechanism for reducing poverty.

9. Participants highlighted the need for country-specific analysis when assessing the gender ramifications of trade policies. Context-specific socio-cultural factors should be fully acknowledged and factored into the economic analysis.

10. An important distinction was drawn between trade and trade policy. Trade was deemed necessary for growth. Trade policies, and specifically those policies that were aimed at fostering market integration and liberalization, tended to have important redistributive effects within the economy, which could either magnify or reduce existing disparities among groups, based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, class and geographical location. Some aspects of the relationship between gender and trade policy were highlighted. Trade policy, particularly export-oriented policies geared to global integration, could play a catalytic role in job creation for women. However, there were qualifications to this. Some of the major areas of concern included low wages in export-oriented assembly sectors, limited effects on fostering the development of skills, limited spillover effects within the economy to generate government revenues and support public provisioning, and new patterns of vulnerability to external shocks.

11. The event provided the opportunity to introduce new tools and resources for mainstreaming gender in macroeconomic policy. It was proposed that a Centre of Excellence for Women's Social and Economic Studies be established in Qatar to serve the international community. The Centre would provide space for framing debates on gender-related issues, for translating theory into action, and for devising responses to some of the most pressing issues related to the role of women in society and in the economy. The usefulness of exchanges of experiences, and of establishing knowledge-sharing networks, was also emphasized. In that respect, it was suggested that a repository of best practices/lessons learned be created as a tool to share experiences on successful projects carried out by women.

II. Education and enabling frameworks/tools for equal access to full employment and decent work

12. It was noted that, due to the lack of adequate social services, women tended to willingly retreat from the labour market and to choose between, rather than effectively combine, work and family life. Such barriers often induced women to prefer flexible work

solutions in the informal market, and unskilled employment. Although women's jobs were frequently underpaid or unpaid, the major contribution by women to the world economy was not denied. Some speakers also pointed to the "internalization" of socially constructed roles. This pointed to difficulties – when analyses were being carried out – in disentangling self-imposed from socially imposed constraints.

13. It was suggested that obstacles holding women back from benefiting from educational gains, via a more equitable access to employment opportunities and a full career, could be overcome with the help of governments and adequate support policies. Social spending was proposed as one of the solutions to release women from unpaid work and to generate a multiplier effect for the whole of society. Other critical factors included adequate childcare networks, improved facilities for women in the workplace, and family-friendly fiscal policies. In addition, the following factors were highlighted as providing an enabling framework for the greater participation of women in the workplace: (a) the legal recognition and enforcement of gender equality; (b) education and skills development; and (c) reproductive health and family planning. Measures to empower women would have important spillover effects and would eventually empower the whole nation, as women represented half of society and educated/cared for the other half.

14. It was pointed out that governmental support policies should address not only women but also families. Several views were expressed on the role of men, and on the need to encourage them to play a more active and participatory role in family and household life.

15. The role of the law was highlighted. Examples were provided of key legal enactments in Bangladesh, Lesotho and Rwanda. Key pieces of legislation had been passed with respect to women's legal capacity and access to economic resources. Key policies and measures had also been adopted on labour-related matters (maternity leave) and with the goal of achieving equality in political participation (quotas). Critical areas of action included (a) free education and skills development; (b) health – with a focus on maternal mortality and family planning; and (c) gender-based violence. Part of the discussion revolved around affirmative action measures, particularly female quotas. Some discussants highlighted the role played by quotas in building a critical mass, though it was recognized that they should represent a transitional/temporary solution towards bridging the gender gap, rather than a permanent mechanism.

16. It was noted that legal and administrative measures taken to foster gender equality encroached onto deeply entrenched customary practices that tended to hold back progress. However, it was also noted that traditional rules and customs were social constructs, and that these evolved. Their evolution would largely depend on the encroaching of legislative action and progressive policies onto socio-cultural norms. It was widely felt that some transformative dynamics were unfolding. There was a suggestion to specifically focus on Arab women, with a view to elaborating a common gender policy at the Arab and Gulf level.

17. The importance of women within the household, and their specific role linked to reproduction, domestic work and child care, was also raised. In this regard, fear was expressed about the risks of women being alienated from family life and the reproductive role. In spite of these concerns, it was agreed that the importance of women's contribution in economic, social and political spheres could not be denied, and that their increased participation should be encouraged at all levels.

III. Agriculture, environment, food security, intellectual property and gender considerations

18. It was noted that the question of rural women was a specific one within the broader question of poverty and undernourishment. However, it was widely felt that women faced specific constraints, and that investment in rural women would yield exponential returns.

19. Participants highlighted persistent gender inequalities in agriculture. Over 80 per cent of the farming in Africa was done by women, who owned only 2 per cent of the land. Women also faced gender-specific constraints in accessing productive inputs and supply-side services. Areas such as time burdens, community leadership and resource control were those where women were less empowered. There had been an increased feminization of poverty, and also an increased feminization of agriculture where women represented 43 per cent of the work force and grew 50 per cent of the food.

20. It was emphasized that the challenges faced by rural women were complex: they related to access to essential services, including water and electricity; education and training; security; technology; the right to land; and creating social safety nets.

21. Policy responses would include action at the national and international level.

22. At the national level, the actions to be taken would include: making sure that national strategies and sector-specific policies were fully engendered and that rural women's perspectives were included in their design and implementation; enhancing rural women's access to health services; training and skills development; enhanced access to productive inputs and extension services; innovative credit schemes with relaxed collaterals; and support for women's groups and cooperatives. The issue of land reform was mentioned too.

23. At the international level (WTO rules), it was emphasized that LDCs should be allowed to protect and subsidize their farmers. Huge disparities existed between the means available to farmers in developed and medium-income developing countries and those available to poor male and female farmers in developing countries and the LDCs. These disparities implied that levels of productivity varied to a large degree and made fair international competition impossible. It would also be critically important to limit or prohibit the massive acquisition of lands (land grabs) where this adversely affected farmers. At a different level (climate change negotiations), the issue of women's representation in international decision-making was also highlighted.
