Economic and Social Council

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to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly,
entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and
peace for the twenty-first century"

Changing social norms to achieve gender equality: expectations and opportunities

Chair's summary

1.   On 16 March 2015, the Commission on the Status of Women held an interactive panel on: "Changing social norms to achieve gender equality: expectations and opportunities". The Vice-Chair of the Commission, Pille Kesler (Estonia), chaired the panel; and the Director Regions ReFocus 2015 from Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, Anita Nayar (India/USA), moderated the discussion. The panellists were: Stephanie Seguino, Professor of Economics at the University of Vermont (USA); Nafissatou J. Diop, Senior Adviser, Coordinator UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on female genital mutilation/cutting: accelerating change (UNFPA); Olena Suslova, Founding Director, Women's Information Consultative Center (Ukraine); Elisa Salinas, CEO, The Women's Project (Mexico); and Chi Yvonne Leina, World Pulse (Cameroon).

2.   Participants identified a number of achievements and good practices, challenges and gaps in addressing social norms and gender stereotypes that are entrenched in every social interaction, as well as in formal and informal institutions, constituting serious impediments to gender equality.

3.   Many participants noted that although progress has been made, in particular with regards to girls' education, women still lag behind in their participation in the labour market and the overall economy. Social norms and gender stereotypes have led to women having lower paid jobs, fewer training opportunities and less access to

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* E/CN.6/2015/1.

productive resources.

4.   Speakers highlighted that social norms and stereotypes are socially constructed and therefore can be changed. They are manifested in the way women and men are portrayed in mass media; considered within education systems and curricula; and targeted in laws and policies and their implementation. In addition, participants stressed that social norms and stereotypes are interwoven with other socio-economic factors, such as poverty, race, ethnicity, disability and social inclusion which reinforce gender inequality and discrimination.

5.   Speakers agreed that change does not happen by itself but requires political commitment, targeted actions and funding. Gender-responsive laws and policies can enable women to fully participate in the economy. Several participants highlighted good practices to ensure increased access of women to employment and an inclusive workplace environment, including equal pay, parental leave, publicly-funded childcare, paid sick leave, affirmative hiring and promotion. Participants identified discriminatory laws, policies and practices in regards to women's access to credit and land as main obstacles for women's entrepreneurship and economic empowerment.

6.   Participants stressed the importance of increased participation of women in the labour market, through changes in corporate and public policies and practices, which result in gradual social norms change with increased acceptance of women as equal actors in the economy. Participants mentioned the adoption of affirmative laws and policies, including quotas and other incentives, as particularly effective in reducing the longstanding gender gaps in leadership roles in the private and public sectors.

7.   While positive social and gender norms could contribute to family cohesion and cultural identity, it was noted that harmful social norms persist resulting in early marriage, female genital mutilation/cutting, breast ironing, and other forms of violence. Participants highlighted the importance of criminalizing these harmful practices through legislation. Legislation, however, has to be fully enforced with the full engagement of all stakeholders at all levels, including in the community.

8.   Participants stressed that the implementation of gender-responsive laws has to be complemented by awareness-raising, capacity-building and engagement at community level in order to achieve full support, make positive changes and mitigate backlash.

9.   Participants added that everyone has a role to play, including men and boys, women and girls, religious and community leaders, public and private sectors, as well as civil society organizations in changing social norms. Participants highlighted the need to engage specific groups of the community with greater determination, including older women who may have suffered a lifetime of discrimination. Men and boys should be engaged as both beneficiaries of and protagonists in making change.

10.   Examples were provided of effective strategies that moved away from a focus on negative terms and instead emphasize positive language and messages. Such an approach would contribute to greater wellbeing, more opportunities and growth in the economy, and more equal and prosperous societies. Examination and knowledge of the local context was important for identifying effective entry-points for change.

11.   Role models can help showcase what is possible, support and connect with young women and men, and create a wider network of change agents. Examples included women working in non-traditional fields, such as in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). These role modelling efforts need to be complemented by targeted awareness-raising, training and mentoring of women and girls to ensure that they can access and succeed in these areas.

12.   Several participants identified a gender-responsive education system, including formal and informal, as the key entry point for systematically addressing and preventing discriminatory and harmful social norms and gender stereotypes and for encouraging attitudes of equality and respect for human rights. A few participants highlighted the need for reform of the educational system in all aspects, including the development of gender-sensitive curricula, reflecting women's and men's diverse experiences and roles in society, training of teachers, as well as active engagement of parents.

13.   Participants highlighted the importance of children knowing their rights from an early age to be able to challenge discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes. While parents play an important role as change agents, working with children through bottom-up approaches has proven effective in equipping them with new and positive norms and messages in dialogues with their parents and families.

14.   Several participants acknowledged the role that media and the advertising industry can play in shaping people's perceptions, social norms and gender stereotypes. These industries can use their power to challenge, rather than reinforce, these norms and stereotypes. Some participants noted progress in their countries, as television and the film industry are gradually portraying women and men in non-traditional roles, including men sharing responsibilities for childcare and domestic work, resulting in positive social norms. Public service announcements and advertising campaigns can help in raising awareness of prevailing stereotypes, and participants watched examples of such spots from one country.

15.   According to participants, information and communication technologies (ICTs), including the internet and social media, can be powerful means for women to claim their rights, dismantle discriminatory norms, and break the silence and fear of violence and discrimination. These new media provide a global space for women to express their concerns, reach out to other women for advice and solidarity, access role models and good practices, and be exposed to alternative views. ICTs have helped women gain confidence, exerted influence towards positive changes in societies, and have been instrumental in creating gender responsive content and mobilizing people for gender equality advocacy, including at the grassroots level. Nonetheless, concern was expressed that technologies are also bringing new means of control, surveillance and exploitation, and new forms of discriminatory norms and stereotypes as well as online violence.

16.   Participants acknowledged the challenges that many women face in accessing the internet, especially in rural areas. Even when internet is available, women may lack access due to prohibitive costs, unreliable connectivity, or cultural norms that discourage them from male-dominated cyber cafes. Some of these restrictions may be overcome as the use of mobile phones becomes widespread in both urban and rural areas. However, large-scale investments, including in form of digital literacy training and women-only cyber cafes, will be critical to ensure that women and girls

fully benefit from and leverage online information, knowledge, networking, and learning opportunities.

17.   Participants stressed the need for robust monitoring and evaluation of laws and policies, as well as systematic collection and analysis of sex-disaggregated data, in order to measure any impact on gender equality and changes in norms and stereotypes. This needs to be combined with gender-responsive planning and budgeting to strengthen accountability.

18.   Participants urged States and United Nations agencies to strengthen sharing of information, experiences, lessons learned and good practices across countries and regions for amplifying positive change and for evidence-based decision-making. Participants requested in particular UN-Women to share good practices and analysis on the effectiveness of measures in changing social norms and gender stereotypes, including in relation to older women.

Note: for further information on the panel please click here.