Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton at the 'Women and Political Participation' event organised by UN Women

New York, 19 September 2011

Can I say what a great pleasure it is to be here, Madam President, Prime Minister, Hillary, colleagues, friends.

I look out at all these wonderful women and dear friends that I see in the audience, all of whom demonstrate the potential of women and, more importantly, what women are capable of achieving.

One of the problems whenever you bring together a group of women of achievement, is that there are too many 'firsts' in what we say: I am the first one in my family to go to university. There will be women in this room nodding in agreement that they too were the first. We hear stories too often about my generation being the first, and the biggest challenge I think we face is to make sure that what was the first becomes the norm, that every child who is a girl has the same opportunities we had.

Somebody once told me the phrase ‘ladder up’ or ‘ladder down’ and, as women, we have to make the choice about whether we continue to push the ladder down and enable the girls and women who will follow us to be able to climb up the ladder and, more importantly, to make the ladder go lower and lower so the climb becomes easier and easier, and that they can get onto the ladder.
Too often we still see in our societies that it’s harder if you are a woman to be able to succeed. It’s more challenging, there are more criticisms, more hurdles we have to get over, and there are more chances that you have to take. But for the next generation, I hope there will be examples in this room that they can look up to and show that it is worth it.

When I became High Representative, I sat in a room with 27 Foreign Ministers from the European Union. They were 27 men. Somebody said to me: ‘Cathy, how does it feel to be with 27 Foreign ministers?’ and I said ‘What does it matter? I am in charge’.

I am sitting here joined by two wonderful Foreign Ministers, one of whom is from Spain and we have the Foreign minister from Cyprus. But we are still too few, I think you will agree. I also had the privilege to work with Margot Wallström who was Vice-President of the European Commission.

One of the great challenges if you're building something new, in the shape of a Common Foreign and Security Policy, is to make sure that we don't forget the importance of building women into every aspect of what we do.

I've increased the number of female heads of delegations, ambassadors if you like for Europe, by 500% since I took on this job 2 years ago. It's still not enough. I try to make sure that women get equal chances in all of the jobs that we have available, but we still have a long way to go. I try to make sure that in every aspect of our policies we recognize the importance of women. We have for every delegation across the world expectations of gender equality not just in who they are but in everything that they do.

And too often when we work in areas of conflict across the world we see that women are not represented at the peace-making table, are not represented in conflict resolution, are unable to have their voices heard nor have the chance to show that they are the people who can take their countries into the future.

So my proposition is that we have made a good start, but we have a long, long way to go. As we've seen changes in our societies and in our world it's increasingly important that we remember to make sure women are built in automatically into every aspect of how our society is developing.
I had the chance to talk to women across North Africa and across the Middle East, and when I was in Benghazi I spoke with a number of women who made it very clear that they wanted to be part of their future and very much want to be part of the future development of their country. What they said was this: "We've never done this before. It's not been part of our culture. How are we going to persuade women that it's for them?" And I said: How do you persuade women that it's for them? By education.

But it's a strength of the collaboration between all of us that we can enable women to feel they can do this. And the opportunities are there for them, for their families and for their friends if they do so.

When I travelled in Egypt and in Tunisia (and I'll be in Tunisia again next week), one of the things that is extremely wonderful to see is how women are engaging in every aspect of society, from civil society groups through the potential candidates for elections. I pay tribute to what Tunisia has already done. But it is very important that we continue to support them financially as well as politically because that's what is going to make the difference, and that is what is positive in all of the programmes that we are developing in the European Union for our neighbourhood.

The final thing I wanted to touch on is the follow up to what Hillary was saying about the economy, because it's always seemed to me that it's ridiculous when we fail to see the contributions that women can make to the economy. It's never made any sense to rule out a huge proportion of potential engineers or artists or politicians, or creative people of all kinds.

I think we have to continue to push hard to enable women to participate fully in the economic life of their country and their future. It's often said the future belongs to us, and more than anything can I just say to all the women represented here: thank you so much for all the contributions that you make and the empowerment that you have given to the women that will follow you.
Joint Declaration: On Advancing Women's Political Participation

Following is a joint declaration issued at the conclusion of the September 19, 2011 United Nations Women event on Women’s Political Participation.

"We, the undersigned Heads of State and Government, Foreign Ministers, and High Representatives, affirm that women’s political participation is fundamental to democracy and essential to the achievement of sustainable development and peace.

We reaffirm the human right of women to take part in the Governments of their countries, directly or through freely chosen representatives, on an equal basis with men, and that all States should take affirmative steps to respect and promote women’s equal right to participate in all areas and at all levels of political life.

We stress the critical importance of women’s political participation in all contexts, including in times of peace, conflict and in all stages of political transition.

We recognize the essential contributions women around the world continue to make to the achievement and maintenance of international peace and security and to the full realization of human rights; to the promotion of sustainable development; and to the eradication of poverty, hunger, and disease. Even so, we are concerned that women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalized from decision-making, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, and attitudes, and due to poverty disproportionately affecting women.

We reaffirm our commitment to the equal rights and inherent human dignity of women enshrined in the United Nations Charter, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and other relevant international human rights instruments. We call upon all States to ratify and fulfill their obligations under the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and to implement fully Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women and Peace and Security and other relevant UN resolutions.
We call upon all States, including those emerging from conflict or undergoing political transitions, to eliminate all discriminatory barriers faced by women, particularly marginalized women, and we encourage all States to take proactive measures to address the factors preventing women from participating in politics such as violence, poverty, lack of access to quality education and health care, the double burden of paid and unpaid work, and to actively promote women’s political participation including through affirmative measures, as appropriate.

We reaffirm and express full support for the important role of the United Nations system in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and we welcome UN Women and its mandate in this regard."