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Statement by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
on the occasion of the
Presentation of the 1994 Maurice Pate Award
to the
All-China Women's Federation

New York
2 May 1994

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UNITED NATIONS CHILDREN'S FUND
Executive Board
1994 Annual Session

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Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
on the occasion of the
Presentation of the 1994 Maurice Pate Award
to the
All-China Women's Federation

New York - 2 May 1994

The presentation of UNICEF's Maurice Pate Award is always a very special occasion. Once a year, at the end of a long day of intense deliberations of our Executive Board, we gather to recognize outstanding achievement for children -- achievement so great that it transcends the specific community, province, nation or region where it was made, becoming a global example and source of inspiration. It is a happy moment, a celebration.

This is especially true this year, for in honouring the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) we are honouring an organization whose immediate constituency -- the 576 million women of China -- constitutes over 20 per cent of the world's women. So we can say that by helping transform the vastness of China over the past four decades, the All-China Women's Federation has also truly helped shape our world.

Many of you know that I was born in China. My grandfather was a medical missionary there at the turn of the century and my father helped establish China's first public health system. In 1922, when I was born in Beijing, and during the years of my youth, it was a backward, semi-feudal country with a handful of urban enclaves of relative wealth and incipient industrialization. For the vast majority, abject poverty was the rule, especially in the countryside. I saw how mass child death, malnutrition and disease were fueled by illiteracy, large families and landlessness. What I witnessed as a boy and young man in China marked my awareness and conscience forever.

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I need not detail here China's great transformation in recent decades. Suffice it to say that today, China is a modern country by almost all human indicators, and on the economic side, it ranks either ninth or third (depending on what yardstick you use) among the world's economic powers. Indeed, never before have we seen such significant improvement in the living conditions of people and such rapid development of a national economy on such a gigantic scale, as we have witnessed in China in recent years. China today is poised to become the largest national economy in the world in the first quarter of the 21st century, a prospect that would have been difficult to imagine only a few years ago. The phenomenal economic progress of the last decade has been possible because of the investment China has made in its people -- in improving their health, education and nutrition.

The All-China Women's Federation -- a non-governmental organization -- has made a major contribution to this remarkable transformation.

What is so extraordinary about the ACWF is that its powerful presence on the national scene as advocate for improving women's status and the well-being of children and families, is matched by its powerful presence at the grassroots. The Federation has 100,000 full-time staff and networks in all of China's provinces; its volunteer activists, who number in the millions, can be found in every city, town and village, day after day, year after year, tirelessly organizing communities for progress and knocking on doors to reach out to individual women, children and families on the most diverse issues, to meet the most diverse needs.

Take immunization. Fifteen years ago, less than 15 per cent of China's children were being immunized against polio, tuberculosis, diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus and measles. It was clear that the 1990 80 per cent coverage goal adopted by the international community would never be met by the Ministry of Public Health working alone; a massive social mobilization and health education effort was needed to do the job. That's where the Federation and its activists played such a critical role. They worked in partnership with highly decentralized health structures to ensure that mothers living even in the most remote and hard to reach communities brought their children to be immunized. They convinced communities and families that initially feared immunization out of ignorance that the vaccines were, in fact, life-savers. With its current rate of 94 per cent coverage for under one year olds -- double that of the United States, for example -- China has already surpassed the year 2000 global goal of 90 per cent immunization. The ACWF deserves much of the credit.

Indeed, the All-China Women's Federation has a knack for turning sectoral projects into social movements. It played a critical role in the success of the "Three Priorities" programme, a nation-wide effort to achieve "better outcome of pregnancy", "better child-rearing", and "better education." The ACWF educates couples to become better parents, trains pre-school teachers, helps communities to set up and manage day care centres, disseminates information on maternal and child health, among other activities.

Where traditional "son preference" is a problem; where girls are not enrolled in school or where they drop out early on; where parents are reluctant to allow their older girls to be taught by male teachers; where women find obstacles to advancement or are abused -- indeed, where any form of gender discrimination exists, Federation activists are there to help find solutions that not only benefit women but also strengthen the entire community.

The ACWF has been key to the advancement and empowerment of rural women in particular. Some 90 million women have received some form of skills training under the Federation's auspices, and the number of women in formal employment has risen to 56 million, up from only 600,000 in 1949. Mass literacy campaigns and leadership training for women have helped the Chinese slogan: "Women hold up half the sky" become a reality. Women delegates in the National People's Congress numbered 154 in 1954; in 1992, the number had risen to 626. The Federation has played a crucial role in getting national legislation approved in the area of women's and children's rights, and specifically in the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which China signed in 1991.

Most recently, working closely with UNICEF and under the auspices of the State Council's National Working Committee for Women and Children, the Federation helped design China's National Programme of Action to achieve the World Summit goals for children and women, and has helped with the development of provincial and county programmes of action. It continues to coordinate the development of effective monitoring and evaluation methods. The ACWF and the Child Development Centre for China have produced a 28-part series of video programmes on the National Programme of Action, that will be broadcast over the China Educational Television network reaching 80 per cent of the population.

China is making rapid progress toward the mid-decade goals to be achieved by 1995. In fact, it has already reached those for immunization levels, reduction of measles cases and deaths, ratification of the Convention, and possibly, elimination of vitamin A deficiency as well. The Federation is aiding in the drive to meet the goals for basic education, baby friendly hospitals, elimination of iodine deficiencies, polio and neonatal tetanus. Projecting current trends, China should be able to achieve the nutrition and water goals. A significantly increased effort will be needed, however, to reach the ORT and sanitation goals.

The momentum of progress can be maintained in the future only by continuing to invest in people. The major challenge faced by the All-China Women's Federation at present is to ensure that, during the complex socio-economic transition China is undergoing, safety nets are in place for the more vulnerable segments of society, namely, children and women, either in depressed areas or in situations where they have inadequate access or opportunities to use services. I am confident that the ACWF will successfully deal with new challenges as it has so many others in the past.

A sea change in social attitudes and policy direction is underway in the world today with respect to women's equality and empowerment. We are light years ahead of where we were only two or three decades ago, and yet we have far to go before we can proclaim victory. Without truly sustainable womanhood, sustainable human development will be impossible. The All-China Women's Federation is an inspiration for continuing efforts to make both a realistic proposition.

Two final comments. First, the All-China Women's Federation and UNICEF know each other well. Not only have the two been close collaborators in many activities, but the ACWF was an active proponent for UNICEF's return to China in 1980 and has been a strong supporter ever since. Thus, the leader of the Chinese delegation to this Annual Session is Madame Wang Shuxian, Vice-President of the All-China Women's Federation.

Second, I am extremely pleased that the Chairperson of the ACWF, Madame Chen Muhua, has come to New York especially to receive the Maurice Pate Award. She is a remarkable woman with a remarkable record of accomplishment. She is China's most outstanding woman financial leader and banker. In my first meeting with Madame Chen Muhua more than 10 years ago -- in the

early and mid-1980s -- she was variously a Vice Premier, Minister for Economic Relations and Trade, President of the People's Bank of China, in charge of the State Family Planning Commission, and the Chinese Governor of the World Bank. She is currently Vice Chairperson of the National People's Congress, as well as Chairperson of the ACWF. Her dynamic leadership virtually guarantees a major, active and effective role for the ACWF in China's achievement of both the mid-decade and year 2000 goals for children.

The All-China Women's Federation is a most worthy recipient of the 1994 Maurice Pate Award.