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Statement by Ms. Karin Sham Poo
Deputy Executive Director (Operations)
of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
ECE High Level Regional Preparatory Meeting
for the
Fourth World Conference on Women

Vienna, Austria
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I am happy to be here today on behalf of UNICEF, to address the distinguished members of the Economic Commission of Europe, Ministers and experts, on a topic of such immense importance and consequence, one very close to the heart of UNICEF and to mine personally.

Women's struggle for full equality and justice in their private and public lives is a vital issue for the world. We have seen momentous progress on other human rights fronts -- the dismantling of the apartheid system in South Africa is perhaps the most recent and spectacular, but fortunately not the only such advance.

The apartheid of gender

As we prepare for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, it is crucial that nations take the strongest and most effective actions to correct the most pervasive form of human rights violations -- the apartheid of gender.

Children, as you all well know, are the central mandate of UNICEF and a trust which has our fullest devotion and commitment. Half of these children are girls, the majority defined and predestined, as girls are everywhere, by their gender... not their ability. Far too many of them will never be able to put to full use their talents, their intelligence, their potential to achieve. Instead, they will learn to deny themselves, to expect less, to even **think** less of themselves than of their brothers, their husbands and sons.

This is why today I want to speak about the apartheid of gender and its corrosive effects on girls and women, and about UNICEF's strong resolve to help end it, throughout all stages of their lives. Permit me to note, first, recent gains that have been registered against the apartheid of gender -- progress made thanks to long years of struggle by hundreds and thousands of grass-roots women's groups.

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Progress made in recent years

The United Nations system, since its inception, has been struggling to improve the status of women. Its blueprint, the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, adopted by the 1985 World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the U.N. Decade for Women, is being reviewed here today. On the basis of national reports, we are now in a better position to assess progress made and obstacles encountered in the implementation of the Strategies. This will allow us to ensure that the Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference for Women will be an excellent benchmark against which advances in the status of women all over the world could be measured.

The World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna last year was a magnificent breakthrough, asserting that "the human rights of women and the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights" and that the full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life and the eradication of all forms of discrimination against women, hidden and overt, are priorities of the international community.

The Conference's Programme of Action is unequivocal: women's rights are human rights. And it brings these human rights home, into the family sphere and the workplaces, marketplaces and schools of societies, as never before. It condemns the violence and abuse many women endure. It condemns the rape and murder of women during armed conflict as war crimes.

Similarly, the International Conference on Population and Development held recently in Cairo was another stunning success for women...and for the entire world. The Conference's programme of action asserts that the role of women and girls is in fact the defining element of all human progress. It states -- and the world increasingly accepts -- that girls' and women's status, education, empowerment and their ability to take advantage of existing resources are key to ensuring human progress, population stabilization and sustainable development.

These two Conferences -- and the global conferences on women before them -- show how far the ideas and arguments of women's progress have come and how widespread their acceptance is today.

We know, however, that as important as they are, breakthroughs at international conferences do not automatically translate into change on the ground. The new international consensus on women needs to be acted upon, and brought to every community, every institution, and every household of every society.

Discrimination, disadvantage and violence

And first and foremost, it must start changing the lives of girls. For as I mentioned earlier, women's oppression spans all stages of their lives -- and sometimes even before. In some countries, as you know, female foetuses are aborted and female infants killed because of gender. In the many communities where these shocking practices still take place, girls who survive have less access to health and education services, are fed less, and have far fewer opportunities than boys. This pattern continues into adolescence, womanhood and old age. The problems facing mothers are particularly worrisome, for they affect the entire family. A right as basic as breastfeeding, for example, is often limited or denied by constraints including misinformation, unsupportive hospital practices, inappropriate marketing of breastmilk substitutes, and the failure of society to protect the maternity rights of working women.

Women all over the world are far too often psychologically abused, physically beaten, sexually exploited. Women's health issues do not receive the funding allocated to diseases suffered exclusively or primarily by men.

Women are **over**-represented among the poor, among the ranks of unskilled workers, among victims of abuse and violence. Women are **under**-represented or **unrepresented** in decision-making bodies such as parliaments and ministries. This apartheid **must** end.

It's true that the situation of women and girls in the countries represented here today is far better. But even in these countries, gender prejudice is a heavy weight to bear from birth, dampening spirit and thwarting potential. Studies show that in industrialized countries girls lose self-confidence, their grades slide and participation in class drops noticeably once they enter adolescence.

The situation in Europe

Today, 75 years after women won the vote in the United States and 23 years after the last European nation finally succumbed to pressures and enfranchised women, the situation in many industrialized countries remains troubling. We are here **because** the situation is troubling, and unacceptable, and we are here not just to speak about the problems but to build consensus for effective action.

Long-entrenched prejudices and disadvantages still hinder women's and girls' progress. The excellent report the ECE Secretariat and the International Labour Organization have prepared for this meeting gives many examples. Permit me to cite a few:

* Unemployment rates in Europe have averaged over 10 per cent in the last three years and are as high as 20 to 30 per cent in some European and Eastern European countries. Long-term unemployment tends to be higher for women than for men.

* Women's jobs are increasingly segregated at the lower end of the labour market. Most low-paid workers in the European Union are women. In many countries, women often are not trained in the new skills needed in today's competitive workplaces, with their rapidly evolving technologies. Once older women lose jobs, they find it very difficult to reenter the market.

* More working women than men live in poverty in a number of industrialized countries, especially those women who are the sole support of their families. In such households in the United States, for example, the poverty rate is almost three times the rate for other families.

* The gap between men's and women's participation in the labour force is narrowing, but is still much wider in most European countries than in the United States. In the United States, however, women have fewer social supports for meeting household, family and career demands.

Crisis in the countries in transition

In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Baltic States, remedial action has been hampered by the dearth of reliable, recent statistics on women's situation. But UNICEF's International Child Development Centre in Florence has just published "Crisis in Mortality, Health and Nutrition" covering nine countries in the region, which should give our common efforts to ease the transition a whole new factual and statistic foundation. We have also prepared a paper focusing more specifically on women, entitled: "Women and Gender in Countries in Transition", which we have made available for this meeting, along with a discussion paper on UNICEF programmes in Central and Eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Baltic Republics.

The reality of market-driven economies is proving far harsher in the region than expected, and women are hurting. At the same time that they are becoming unemployed in large numbers, they find themselves without the strong social protections and benefits they enjoyed in the past.

In one of the countries in transition, 77 per cent of the 600 women recently surveyed were unemployed, most laid-off within the last year. Maternal mortality was found to be four times higher than the average in the other industrialized nations. A major factor in this is the shortage of family planning facilities and

the high rate of abortions -- there are now actually more abortions in most of these countries than live births. And there are indications that domestic violence against women is rising amidst the complexities and frustrations of rapid social and economic change.

The need for human-centered development

In the developing and industrialized countries, and in the countries in transition, patterns of development that are proving to be unsustainable, and that exact such high human tolls, are being challenged and viable alternatives are being sought. Many of these human issues confronting the world today have long formed a core agenda of the women's movement. Women have worked to protect the environment, have pushed for social and economic reforms, have struggled for better education and ways for all people to develop their potential.

Their efforts have advanced the idea of human-centred development, in which the basic needs of people -- for health care, education and employment -- are the true gauge and basis of human progress.

But even as the world prepares for the critically-important World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in March next year, with human-centred development in mind, social and economic exclusion continues to be the chief characteristic of most national and global economic systems.

The problem of the economic marginalization of the poorest nations, and of the poorest people within nations, must be confronted if there is to be true human progress -- and progress for women. Free-market economic policies have shown that they are successful in the short-term creation of wealth, but they also have an inbuilt tendency to favour the already advantaged. Governments now have the responsibility to harness the power of the market to the cause of sustainable development -- both nationally and at a global level.

The voices of women are being heard on these issues as never before and they are making an impact. How much more equal the struggle for human progress would be if women didn't also have to fight against gender oppression. Let us determine to end it once and for all.

UNICEF and gender

UNICEF, together with governments, other international agencies, and NGOs, is working against the apartheid of gender through public advocacy and by incorporating the gender dimension into our programmes of cooperation in over 130 developing

countries. Our National Committees in 35 industrialized countries are also raising gender awareness through education for development programmes.

A woman's level of education and her ability to earn income often determine the way society and her family regard her. Social data from all regions have consistently shown that when women are empowered with education, training, and access to credit, health care, family planning and other basic services, the well-being of their children improves and birth rates decline. UNICEF efforts in these areas start with girls, and 10 of the 27 goals endorsed by the World Summit for Children call for special attention to the needs of girls and women. National Programmes of Action to achieve these goals -- some by the end of 1995 and the rest by the year 2000 -- are in place in almost 120 countries. Our gender efforts are also aimed at getting boys and men to understand and combat gender oppression, and to share household tasks and childrearing responsibilities traditionally assigned to women.

UNICEF has embraced the Women's Equality and Empowerment Framework, centering on the following five elements:

* **Welfare** - What is the status of women, relative to men, in nutrition and income? Such measurements are essential to reveal basic social inequalities.

* **Access** - How extensive is women's lack of access to services such as education and training, both vital elements for social development?

* **Awareness** - Are women aware of the social and political factors that inhibit their advancement? These factors, often concealed by traditions and long-standing and accepted social norms, need exposure if women are to act to improve their situation.

* **Participation** - How fully and equally are women represented in project planning, from needs assessment to management, implementation and evaluation? If they are not, projects will reflect and replicate the powerlessness women experience generally.

* **Control** - Do women play equal roles with men in decision-making, control of the factors of production and distribution of benefits? Such equality is essential if women are to gain the economic power on which progress depends.

UNICEF is also taking action to develop a better understanding of issues concerning gender and women in development in our own offices. A gender-training package, based on these five points was tailored to the UNICEF mandate and country programme process in order to improve the capacity of the organization and its

counterparts to address gender issues. About 800 UNICEF programme officers and representatives worldwide have attended courses over the past two years, and training is also being provided for government counterparts and UNICEF partners in many countries.

I would like, at this point, to highlight several priority areas where we at UNICEF believe the will can be mustered and attention and resources concentrated to assure measurable and significant benefits for women and the world.

Priorities for action

*** First, we call on all countries to ratify and implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child -- these are fully complementary and mutually-supporting legal and ethical instruments for progressive social change.**

CEDAW is one of the single most potent tools for systematically eliminating gender oppression. What better and more fitting time for universal ratification than now, as we approach Beijing? The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women must be scrupulously followed, in both letter and spirit. To make this possible, responsible regulatory bodies and agencies to monitor and ensure full compliance need to be created. Such bodies would also fill an important need in helping collect and manage the necessary gender and age specific data and statistics.

The Platform for Action should call for Governments to review any reservations made at the time of ratification with a view to rescinding them. These reservations undermine the scope of the Convention and the commitment to eliminating discrimination.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which explicitly guarantees children rights and protections without regard to gender, is an excellent tool that can be used with CEDAW to uproot gender disadvantage and prejudice early in each child's life.

It is heartening that already 167 countries have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, beginning a crucial transformation of their societies. It is time for all countries and especially all groups working for women to embrace and use it to the fullest.

*** Second, governments need to set concrete goals for the advancement of women and a time frame in which these goals are to be met.**

Goals and targets do not always work, but with political and social commitment and the systems needed to monitor progress, goals can be powerful mobilizers. Let me cite an example of how goal-

setting has given impetus to our work. In the early 1980s, only about 10 per cent of the world's children were immunized. By 1990, after a well coordinated international effort to achieve an agreed-upon goal, the target of immunizing 80 per cent of all infants before their first birthday was reached. Whole societies were mobilized around reaching the goal. Today some 125 million children per year are receiving immunization on five occasions before their first birthday -- and some 3 million young lives are being saved annually as a result.

Similarly, we at this meeting should determine specific targets for inclusion in the final programme of action for Beijing and call for the creation of systems and bodies to monitor them. Commitments without goals tend to be forgotten.

*** Third, the equitable representation and participation of women in decision-making and policy-making positions is an issue of urgent concern.**

Equal representation is a fundamental tenet of democracy. And yet women hold less than 12 per cent of parliamentary seats in Western Europe, the United States, Canada, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. When decisions on financial matters affecting whole populations are made, how many of them are made by women? How many finance ministries, how many banks, and how many major corporations are headed by women? More, perhaps, than 20 years ago, but disgracefully few on the threshold of the 21st century.

We at the United Nations are acutely aware of the need to improve our own record on this score. The General Assembly of the United Nations has set a goal of ensuring that women hold at least 35 per cent of all professional level positions by 1995, although the Secretary-General himself has called for complete gender parity at the senior level to commemorate the UN's 50th anniversary next year. Currently, women hold 32.4 per cent of UN professional posts. As Chairperson of the Steering Committee for the Improvement of the Situation of Women in the United Nations, I can tell you that progress is being made, but from my point of view it is not fast enough. We are closer to the goal of gender parity in professional staffing at UNICEF -- at present, 39.3 per cent of our professionals are women -- and our goal is to reach parity by the year 2000. So you see, we still have to do better, if we want to really practice what we preach.

*** Fourth, we call on governments to commit the resources needed to support gender equality.**

We cannot emerge from this Conference without a profound commitment in each country to provide the additional resources to remedy the social and economic consequences of gender discrimination. Words are not enough.

Even more, there is a dual responsibility for the countries of this region. Not only must there be sufficient resources for women at home, we have an obligation to our sisters abroad.

To that end, UNDP, UNFPA, UNESCO and UNICEF have joined forces to promote the 20/20 Initiative. It is a practical formula to fund basic social services at a time of economic austerity and cutbacks in development assistance. The Initiative calls for donor governments to commit 20 per cent of all development assistance to efforts to satisfy basic human needs. At the same time, developing country governments would make a similar 20 per cent budgetary commitment, funding child care, basic education, primary health care, family planning information and services, and other human needs.

Experience has shown that investment in girls' and women's health, education and overall well-being is one of the highest-yield investments that can be made, both for families and societies at large.

The 20/20 Initiative should be embraced at the World Summit for Social Development and translated into even more specific commitments to improve the lives of women and girls at the Women's Conference in Beijing.

*** Fifth, far greater efforts need to be made to end violence against women.**

Gender oppression, racism, great poverty, political repression -- all are forms and faces of violence. By their very nature, in the injustices they create, they engender overt violence. In the United States, wife abuse is the leading cause of injury among women of reproductive age. In Canada, 62 per cent of women murdered in one year died as a result of domestic violence. One fourth of 150 women interviewed in Norway reported having been physically or sexually abused by a male partner in 1989. In Ukraine in 1993, more than 2,000 rapes and 30 sexual murders of women were reported. In the Russian Federation in 1993, 14,500 women were killed and over 56,000 were injured by their husbands. Such violent abuse is also widespread in developing countries, where certain cultural practices add to the toll. Female genital mutilation, for example, affects an estimated 2 million girls a year. Sexual exploitation of girls and women -- including child pornography and organized sex tourism -- is another rampant global abuse, violent by its very nature.

All these forms of gender-focused carnage must end. Governments must protect women from them, and fund programmes to end them. And in a world ravaged by so many conflicts, where women are so often affected or directly targeted, women have much to add to the peacemaking process. They must play an important and equal role in peace mediation and education. UNICEF is proud to have

helped organize a workshop on gender-related violence in the framework of the NGO forum preceding this conference.

*** Sixth, societies must find ways to end degrading and exploitative images of women and girls in the media and advertising.**

Accountability is the question here. The tobacco industry is finding itself besieged in the United States and a number of other countries on many fronts now, but one of the first challenges was to its freedom to advertise a product that was dangerous to health. Media and commercial depictions of women as sexual objects not only assault their dignity and self-esteem, but they also contribute to violence against women through the models of behaviour they portray. The challenge is to protect women while protecting freedom of the press. This is an area where cooperation between governments, the media, the private sector, international agencies and NGOs can be very effective.

Which leads to my seventh and final point...

*** Which is to urge governments to support NGOs that are working on women's issues.**

The women's movement has proven to be a tremendous positive force for change. Many women's NGOs have already done pioneering and heroic work, often with little money. This is hardly surprising since women as a whole command few resources. Therefore, if we are really committed to ending the apartheid of gender, then Governments must provide the legal framework and the financial resources to enable women's organizations to effect the monumental changes which equality requires.

Many of the proposals made by women's NGOs to improve the regional platform here in Vienna deserve our full support.

Before closing, I would like to congratulate the Economic Commission for Europe for the excellent work it has done in preparing this meeting. It is an example of how important it is to integrate the social and gender dimension into all future ECE statistical analyses and economic policy development. We strongly recommend that your governments consider ways to strengthen the Commission so it can effectively follow-up on this gathering's recommendations to mainstream and integrate women's concerns.

This meeting takes us a big step closer to success in Beijing next September. Let us all intensify our efforts over the coming months to ensure that the Fourth World Conference on Women fulfils the hopes, expectations and needs of women and girls everywhere.