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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
on the occasion of
International Women's Day 1992

UN Trusteeship Council Chamber, United Nations
New York
6 March 1992



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Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

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It is a privilege and a pleasure, indeed, to commemorate International Women's Day with all of you here today. There is always a bittersweet quality to this special day -- our celebration of women's strengths and accomplishments is also a protest against a stubborn status quo of discrimination and oppression. International Women's Day is needed. President Perhen and the group of Equal Rights for Women in the UN to the extent everyday of the year is not a celebration of women and equality between the sexes.

I would argue that we are living through a new kind of revolution -- an ethical revolution, fundamentally -- and that women are at its heart. The "front-lines" of this mostly peaceful revolution are daily life itself -- extending from the family to the "global village" -- and its "barricades" are piled-high with examples of women's integrity and nurturing in public as well as private spheres. But even as we recognize women's vital contributions to these epoch-making changes, we must continually remind ourselves that talk of democracy will remain hollow just so long as all women -- and especially poor women -- are denied full equality. Now that the ideological divide between East and West has been bridged, we must address ourselves to narrowing the development gaps between North and South, the income gaps within countries...and the gender gaps within families, communities and work-places. These are the key challenges humankind faces on the threshold of the 21st century, the third millennium.

In a letter he wrote late in life, Sigmund Freud said that "the great question that has never been answered and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is 'What does a woman want?'" With all due respect to the father of psychoanalysis, I think you'll agree with me that the answer to that "great question" is, in fact, quite clear and straight-forward: women want equality; they want to be treated like human beings; and they want a fulfilling family life.

This has been our experience at UNICEF. The progress we have made internally toward gender equality inside UNICEF mirrors the evolution of UNICEF's policy towards women in our programmes in over 110 developing countries. Our policy in the field has been marked by a programmatic leap from what was essentially a welfare approach to women as mothers to one that is development-oriented. This leap has meant the adoption of an expanded definition of women's role — one that supports not only women's nurturing/reproductive functions but also their needs and responsibilities as economic providers, food producers and community leaders, emphasizing combined actions that offer synergistic benefits for women's and children's well-being within a context that stresses collective action and self-reliance. Today, in partnership with governments, sister international agencies and NGOs, we are promoting systematic efforts aimed at empowering women to take actions to dramatically improve conditions for themselves, their children and their families.

It became clear to us in UNICEF, in the early-1980s, that a heavily male-dominated organization in which women were seriously under-represented — especially at the senior level — could not effectively make the shift in the field I've just described. We would have to practice in-house what we preached outside. The early initiative for change came from staff — particularly women staff members. It so happened that several senior women left the organization for personal reasons in mid-decade and an ad hoc group came together informally to look at the various issues facing women in UNICEF. This led us to form a special staff-management task force — one of two that have been convened — for the purpose of making recommendations to the Executive Director on ways to achieve gender equality.

The main elements of the strategy UNICEF adopted can be summarized as follows:

- * First, as I mentioned, we established an official task force to define the issues and propose changes. We felt it was important to set up a dynamic consultative process complementing our established personnel and management channels.
- * Second, we issued a series of Executive Directives making it clear to the entire organization the degree to which achieving progress on this score was a priority to management. These directives served as guidance to our Appointments and Placements Committee and the other bodies responsible for recruitment, career development and personnel matters.
- * Third, we established specific numerical targets; that is, for each level, we defined goals for the number of women we wanted to see filling posts throughout the organization.
- * Fourth, we established a monitoring system to track progress, with regular reporting to the Executive Director.

We have made significant progress using this approach. In 1990, we met our first five-year goal: one-third of our International Professionals were women, up from only a quarter in 1985. By the end of 1991, the proportion had risen to 36%. Looking at the senior levels, one of my three deputies is a woman -- our Deputy Director for Operations, Ms. Karin Lokhaug, who as you know also chairs the UN's Steering Committee for the Improvement of the Status of Women in the Secretariat. Eighteen per cent of our D-1s and above are women, up from only three per cent five years ago. I am especially pleased that 30 of the 90 heads of field offices, or 33 per cent, are now women.

We have committed ourselves to making further progress. By the end of 1994, our goal is to have 40 per cent of all professional posts filled by women; by the year 2000, we hope to have reached gender neutrality in our staffing patterns. Not long ago I received 17 specific recommendations from our Task Force on Women, most of which I found both practical and implementable. Our Division of Personnel is developing a Human Resources Plan for UNICEF that will help us accelerate the pace of change. We are in the process of setting up a new consultative group on women to work with the personnel division and staff on these issues, reporting to me through the Deputy Director of Operations.

More than abstract statistical targets, we are seeking a fundamental change in corporate culture with respect to gender. We are not solely interested in having qualified women fill professional and senior posts; we want UNICEF to constitute a truly hospitable environment for all women staff, with equal opportunities for advancement, good working conditions, respectful treatment by colleagues and managers, and the chance to exercise leadership at all levels. We want to make our offices more and more "baby-friendly" -- that is, to provide our women staff members who become mothers with the option to work full-time, part-time or flexible hours; to facilitate nursing on office premises; to establish day care facilities wherever possible, as well as other measures to prevent the interruption or abandonment of their careers.

If the United Nations system is to take full advantage of the remarkable "window of opportunity" offered by the 1990s for making quantum leaps of human progress, we must become "role models" for the more meaningful international order being shaped today. Ensuring equality for women in the UN through creative, affirmative action -- using specific, time-bound, trackable goals along the way -- will help accelerate our organization's reform process and strengthen its role in the world.