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Statement by Ms. Karin Sham Poo
Deputy Executive Director (Operations)
of the
United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
Second Asian and Pacific Ministerial Conference
on Women and Development

Jakarta, Indonesia
13 June 1994

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I am delighted to have this opportunity to speak on behalf of UNICEF at this important ministerial meeting.

UNICEF is absolutely and enthusiastically committed to women's equality and empowerment. We have come to understand what so many others now understand -- that achieving gender equality is not only an end in itself, good, just, right and beneficial to half the world's population, but it is also absolutely central to improving the lives of children, to building sustainable development and creating a civilized, humane and peaceful world in the 21st century.

And it all begins with our treatment of today's girls, tomorrow's women.

For us at UNICEF, the centrality of women and girls to the entire development process was powerfully reaffirmed at the beginning of the decade. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which came into force in 1990, sets forth universal standards for society's treatment of all children and explicitly prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender.

I am aware that the meeting of Senior Officials which preceded this Ministerial Conference has recognized the Convention on the Rights of the Child as an international instrument that is complementary to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The 1990 World Summit for Children similarly highlighted the need for reducing disparities between boys and girls and urged that girls receive priority attention in National Programmes of Action (NPAs).

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The global goals set by the World Summit, and adopted in the NPAs, cannot be achieved unless girls are targeted equitably in programmes for child survival, development and protection. Not only does the setting of gender-sensitive targets become critical in the achievement of goals for children, it also provides unique opportunities to counter, early on, the discrimination faced by girls in all stages of life.

The life cycle approach is proving particularly effective combined with gender sensitive targets. It establishes the need to gather gender-disaggregated data at every step of a girls's life from birth through adulthood.

Achievement of the year 2000 goals will overcome the worst effects of absolute poverty in the lives of children, while helping to interrupt the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next. It will vastly improve the lives of girls and women. It will slow population growth, ease stress on the environment, give a boost to economic development, bolster fragile democracies and help prevent violent conflicts.

In the past few years, UNICEF and its programme partners have reevaluated the multiple roles women perform. As recently as last month, UNICEF's Executive Board approved a new policy for promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Under the new policy, far more is expected of men in terms of sharing parental responsibilities, and more support should be directed to women as entrepreneurs and managers.

In order that poor women do not become trapped in a downward spiral, passing on the same disadvantages to their own children, especially their girl children, major changes in policies, laws, and attitudes continue to be required. UNICEF is committed to help make such historic changes come about.

Because of its achievements to date, its huge population and growing role in the world economy, the Asian and Pacific region obviously has a central role in the drama of social change with gender equity, to ensure the human future.

On the positive side, there are the examples of the All-China Women's Federation and the Indonesian P.K.K. -- Family Welfare Promotion Movement. They help transform their societies and shape the world, with empowerment for women and girls' lives foremost in their work. May I congratulate here the All-China Women's Federation for receiving the 1994 UNICEF Maurice Pate Award, and recall that the PKK received the 1988 award.

It should be noted that the ASEAN countries as a whole have a Plan of Action for children, as part of their commitment to children and women; that SAARC has declared the 1990s as the Decade of the Girl Child and has included the reduction of gender

disparities as part of the Colombo Resolution on Children. Many of the countries represented here have already taken positive and innovative steps to improve girls' opportunities.

Yet problems remain. Malnutrition and illiteracy, unequal access to education, child labour and child prostitution, economic and political inequalities, all contribute to disadvantages for girls and women.

Another exceedingly difficult problem that persists in this part of the world is the widespread "son-preference" that has, for girls, life-and-death dimensions. What more dramatic example of gender discrimination could there be than the phenomenon of tens of millions of "missing" girls and women -- possibly as many as 100 million -- whose existence could be predicted from general demographic trends, but who do not appear in national censuses because they have fallen victim to sex-selective abortions, female infanticide and systematic neglect.

Also, maternal mortality rates in Asia and the Pacific are among the highest in the world. Simple solutions are available. More training at community level is needed to identify and refer women at risk, coupled with institutions prepared to assess them.

In this perspective, it would be ideal if the National Programmes of Action which your governments have prepared to implement the goals of the World Summit for Children reflect the gender dimension and meet the needs of girls -- especially poor and rural girls. Of particular importance is the need for monitoring mechanisms that provide gender-disaggregated data to track and address in a more systematic and cost-effective fashion the disadvantages suffered by girls and women.

We hope and expect to see significant progress for girls and women at this September's International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo; and then, next March, at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen. The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in September will bring it all together and prepare humankind for a quantum leap of social progress into the third millennium. I am confident that your accomplishments over the coming months and years will contribute much to this take-off that is so tremendously vital to the survival of our planet.

I would like to close on a personal note. I have been involved in struggles for women's rights and gender equity since the early 1960s; today I am Chairperson of the Steering Committee for the Improvement of the Situation of Women in the United Nations. I am grateful that as a girl I had the opportunities that permit me to be here today. But so many do not have opportunities. So much potential is lost to stereotypes, discrimination or neglect.

My experience has taught me that seeking equal opportunities does not necessarily mean pursuit of identical roles for men and women. I would be the last to conjure up stereotypes -- we've had enough of those. But I do believe that there are qualities that women have in abundance that need not -- must not -- be lost in the struggle for equality and equity. That is why it is important that we have a fair distribution of women decision makers at all levels of society, from the grass-roots to the highest ones. I am convinced that women have a special contribution to make to society and that the world will be a better place when we are fully empowered to make it.

The best way to begin, I am convinced, is with girls. They should not be lost in the shadows of our work on and for women and a new society. They could light and lead the way, if we share more with and do more for them, if we listen to them and to youth. They are tomorrow's women.