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Statement by Acting Director

of the

United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)

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to the

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Mr. President, Distinguished Delegates:

It is said that an optimist is someone who believes that we live in the
best of all possible worlds, while a pessimist is someone who fears that
this is true.

By these standards, those of us gathered here in Cairo this week are certainly not optimists. Most of us can imagine far better worlds than the one we now inhabit.

We can all imagine a world in which women participate equally with men at all levels of the political process and public life, contributing their particular knowledge, expertise and experience to the creation of societies that are more just and more equitable; a world in which all men and all women are provided with the education necessary for them to meet their basic human needs; a world where women and men have equal access to society's resources (be it income, land, credit, information or technology); and where a harmonious partnership between men and women supports enhanced standards of living.

We can all imagine a world in which women and men are full partners in both productive and reproductive life, sharing responsibility for the care and nurture of children and maintenance of households; a world in which the size of families reflects the preferences and responsible decision-making of women and men; a world in which women and men, everywhere, can make choices about their own lives and influence the quality of their existence; and where relationships between and among individuals, communities and nation states are characterized by mutual respect, understanding and compassion.

That is why we have gathered here. And that is why we also cannot count ourselves among the pessimists -- despite the terrible headlines that confront us on a daily basis, despite the overwhelming magnitude of the problems we encounter.

Rather, we are realists. We know that the world we inhabit is the only one we have got, and that if we are to sustain and improve it, we all have to work together

ALL.

Women and Men. North and South.

Distinguished Delegates:

We cannot expect to move closer toward the goal of sustainable human development if we fail to tap half of the resources at our disposal -- half of the knowledge, half of the skills, half of the strength.

We cannot begin to resolve crucial population issues if we fail to address the needs and preferences of half of the world's population.

We at UNIFEM know that questions of population, women's equality, and sustainable human development are inextricably linked and wholly interdependent. We know, too, that the empowerment of women is crucial to stabilizing world population growth. And our experience teaches us that one means of empowering women is by giving voice to their needs and concerns and respecting the solutions they propose to the challenges which they face.

Conscious of this, UNIFEM has consistently sought to bring the voices of women, especially the least advantaged women, to international fora such as this International Conference on Population and Development. And, in support of their declared positions, we have just as consistently argued that women and girls should have the same educational opportunities as men and boys; AND the same employment opportunities.

We have argued, too, that access to quality care is a fundamental human right -- the hall mark of a humane society, the key to strong families and communities, and a prerequisite for sound population policies; that the health and nutrition of the girl child, from infancy through adolescence, is critical and should form part of a larger commitment to correct a situation in which millions of women the world over, because they are born female, are denied adequate health care, even during their child-bearing years . . . the result of which is, often, permanent disability or death.

Finally, we have reminded the international community that wherever, and in whatever form it manifests itself, violence against women is an obstacle to development. And we have demonstrated, through our programs and projects, that women possess the intellectual and imaginative energy to lead their communities, and that what they have to say is important (perhaps now, even more important) to the development of our world society.

And yet, Distinguished Delegates;

In spite of these efforts, and similar efforts on the part of sister UN agencies and millions of women and men the world over, in spite of the availability of a large number of internationally approved instruments and the progress made in implementing them - the situation of women has deteriorated in many countries, especially in the developing world.

How can this be? And what more needs to be done?

A very perceptive author and critic, Audre Lorde, once observed:

For those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it. For others, it is to share and spread also those words that are meaningful to us. But primarily for us all, it is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding. Because in this way alone we can survive, by taking part in a process of life that is creative and continuing, that is growth.

And it is never without fear

Mr. President, Distinguished Delegates:

The brackets that leap out at us from the pages of the Draft Programme of Action are a bold reminder that the issues we are addressing at this conference are extraordinarily sensitive.

But even as we acknowledge this fact, let us agree not to bracket our imaginations. Let us agree not to bracket our sense of possibility, or our confidence in the capacity of men and women to plan their futures wisely. And let us not bracket our determination to work together to shape population policies that are humane, respectful, and that move us toward a far better world.

I thank YOU.

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