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CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE
FOR THE WORLD CONFERENCE OF
THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S YEAR
3-14 March 1975

STATEMENT MADE BY H.I.H. PRINCESS ASHRAF PAHLAVI (IRAN),
CHAIRMAN OF THE CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE FOR THE WORLD
CONFERENCE OF THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S YEAR

In accordance with the decision taken by the Consultative Committee at its second meeting on 4 March 1975, the statement made by the Chairman at the Committee's first meeting on 3 March is circulated herewith.

In making me Chairman of this Consultative Committee, you have not only shown your trust, which touches me deeply and merits my sincere gratitude, but, more important, you have given me a task of whose magnitude I am fully aware.

In the history of the struggle for equality between men and women, proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations and many international instruments, the role of our Committee may be decisive.

The Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women recognizes that such discrimination is fundamentally unjust and constitutes an offence against human dignity.

Unfortunately, despite all the efforts of international, regional and national bodies, this equality has remained largely theoretical.

Even today, discrimination very often begins from the cradle and accompanies women throughout life. In almost every private and public sphere women are often treated as inferior and marginal.

Whether within the family, at school or at work, to be born a woman is to be handicapped in some way. Not only is this situation extremely unjust and contrary to fundamental human rights and human dignity, but its harmful repercussions also affect men and children just as much as women and severely hamper the social and economic progress of mankind.

It was in order to give new impetus to action in this sphere, to mobilize international opinion and to induce Governments to turn their attention to this problem that the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 1975 as International Women's Year.

In this year of 1975 the major event will undoubtedly be the Conference of the International Women's Year, the first world meeting to be devoted to the subject at the level of government delegations.

As you know, the main task of the Conference will be to draw up an international plan of action for making the central theme of International Women's Year, "Equality, Development and Peace", a reality; it is for the purpose of preparing this plan of action that this Consultative Committee is meeting today.

Accordingly, the success of the Mexico Conference will depend largely on the quality of our work, and its outcome will, in turn, determine the success of any future action on behalf of women.

Although there are some similarities in the problems of women throughout the world, the form they take varies a great deal from region to region. The fact that all geographical regions are represented within this Committee should enable us to keep this diversity of circumstances in mind and to deal with the over-all problem.

Nevertheless, certain principles and basic data are common to all women

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throughout the world. This is so primarily because women's problem is a fundamentally human problem, it involves justice and respect for the human person as such. Justice and a sense of dignity demand that every woman should have equal opportunities, rights and obligations, towards herself as an individual, towards her children as a parent, towards society as a citizen.

The theme of equality is, of course, not new, and in this sphere the Commission on the Status of Women, in particular, has remarkable achievements at the legal level to its credit. Regrettably, the international conventions adopted have not been widely ratified, and moreover, even when the terms of a law are not discriminatory, it is not necessarily obeyed in practice.

In our times, open and legal discrimination may not be the chief obstacle to the advancement of women. The major problems arise, rather, from traditional attitudes to the role of women in society.

In this connexion, a whole process of education and of changing the mental attitudes, not only of men but also of women themselves, is required, a long-term task which demands sustained and continuous effort.

It is not sufficient to proclaim great principles or to make fine declarations. The status of women will not be helped by verbal ectoplasms.

The true emancipation of women begins only with their economic independence. To give them the intellectual and technical equipment to earn their living directly, without depending on men, is to lay the foundations for their liberation.

It is in this sense that the integration of women in development is of real importance. There is a small but essential difference between the integration of women in development as a means of securing the advancement of women and the integration of women as units of labour, which, if considered from that viewpoint alone, could lead to increased exploitation.

Women's right to work on completely equal terms with men, recognition of the value of their contribution to society, within the home or outside it, this is the keystone of all action on behalf of women, and from it arise most of their other rights and obligations. The right to work in itself implies access to the practical means of exercising this right, namely, education and technical and vocational training, the abolition of the division of work into "male" and "female" sectors, equal pay for equal time and quality of work, the same career prospects and the same access to posts of responsibility, etc.

This implies, in short, the liberation of women from the chains which have so long confined them to the home. It is obvious that women cannot hope to participate fully in decision-making and in the economic activities of society until they are in a position freely to decide the number of their children. A high birth-rate, because of the servitude it creates, is very frequently accompanied by the attribution of inferior status to women and is as much the result as the cause of underdevelopment, a vicious circle which must now be broken.

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In this sphere, as in all others, the fundamental interdependence between the status of women and the level of a country's economic and social progress is clearly evident.

That the international community seems to have become aware of this interdependence is evidenced by the Strategy for the Second Development Decade, the Population Conference, the Food Conference and all the regional plans of action for the integration of women in development.

Basic to any action is the fundamental need for a policy of education. This education is required at several levels, and most of all in educating and informing the masses, to whom the role of women, all too often overlooked, must be made clear.

From their earliest years children hear that women are endowed with limited intelligence, less capacity for work, and a certain image of women within the home is inculcated in them.

Facts demonstrate the absurdity of these prejudices, but customs and traditions are such that women themselves often acquiesce in an image from which they are the worst sufferers.

In this sphere the role of communications and teaching programmes is essential.

Just as decisive are the struggle against illiteracy, and technical and vocational education for women.

Statistics show that the highest percentage of illiteracy is found among women. Even when primary education is compulsory, girls abandon their studies earlier and the percentage of their participation declines rapidly at the secondary level and falls very low at the technical and university levels. This is due to the fact that girls are accustomed to marry earlier and to confine their activities to household work.

Thus, women who want to work or who are compelled to earn their livelihood are everywhere faced with the same obstacles because of their lack of training. This resistance of societies to the education of women and to their participation in social and professional activities is based mainly on two mistaken ideas:

Firstly, there is the idea that children are the sole responsibility of the mother. However, since maternity is essentially a social function, simple logic requires that domestic and family responsibilities are shared equally among men and women. There is also the idea that the participation of women in the economic activity of a country is hardly necessary. However, in the first place, quite apart from any consideration of usefulness, the right to work is a fundamental human right, a source of development, freedom and independence.

Furthermore, it is well known that, in addition to their household tasks and their maternal duties, women in rural areas are responsible for a large and perhaps the major part of agricultural work.

In towns also, more and more women are compelled to work in order to supplement the family income; they thus have two jobs, one outside and the other at home, where the tasks are not shared to any great extent by the husband.

Finally, the marginal character of women's role in national economic development causes an enormous waste of human resources.

It is also obvious that the lack of education of the mother automatically affects the children in her care.

An oriental proverb rightly states: "Educate a man and you educate a person; educate a woman and you educate a nation."

But it is not enough to educate; education as now conceived must be entirely reformed both in its spirit and in its methods.

While discrimination against women exists in nearly all countries and must be condemned as such, it is particularly evident in the poor countries where such vital needs as hygiene, food, housing, literacy and basic education are deficient at all levels. Moreover, the problems facing women in rural areas are different from the problems facing women in urban areas.

Our Committee must take all these questions into account in preparing a plan of international action.

The failures of the past must not discourage us; we can build only in a spirit of optimism and the year 1975 provides us with a solid basis for further action. Not only has the ground been prepared to some extent by the efforts of the last 30 years, but also it seems that for some time now Governments have become increasingly aware of the importance of the problem.

Of course, we cannot do everything at once in a field so complex as this - the plan of action which we must ponder can hardly be restricted to a period of one year, and we must admit that at least a decade of sustained efforts will be necessary to achieve substantial results.

Another reason for optimism lies in the fact that within a few months of the Mexico Conference, nearly two thirds of the Heads of State and Government of the world have approved the Declaration on International Women's Year which I had the honour to bring to their attention. In doing so, they have expressed their support for any specific measure designed to eliminate any form of discrimination against women.

For the international community, International Women's Year is a unique opportunity for promoting equality between men and women, not only in law but also in everyday life, ensuring the full participation of women in the development effort both at the planning and executing level, and guaranteeing them the full enjoyment of human rights.

There is no question of granting rights to women but of recognizing and respecting what is inherent in them, as human beings.

Moreover, harmony between nations cannot be guaranteed as long as harmony does not exist between men and women within each family, each enterprise and each country. Women have their role to play in peace-keeping, a role which no one can afford to disregard. As early as 1846, a great writer, Gogol, wrote:

"The influence of women may be considerable, in particular nowadays, in the present order or disorder of our society, where we perceive a certain civic lassitude and a spiritual coldness, a kind of decline in moral values, which make an awakening necessary. To bring about this awakening, the collaboration of women is essential."

And, according to Oscar Wilde, the past can always be effaced, but the future is unavoidable.

It is high time to break once and for all with a past full of frustration and full of the exploitation of women and to begin a sincere drive towards a future where men and women will live in mutual comprehension, freedom and dignity.

Allow me to say a few words about the organization of our work.

We have only 10 working days to complete our task. We must therefore work constructively and with a certain discipline.

With that in mind, I would request you to limit your statements as much as possible.

I would also like to appeal to you to begin our meetings punctually and thus to avoid wasting time.

Before concluding, I would like to convey a special word of thanks to Mrs. Helvi Sipila, whose devotion and efficiency we have always profoundly admired.

Every day of this year of 1975 reveals to us more and more clearly that the choice of Mrs. Sipila as Secretary-General of the International Women's Year is an important factor in the success of our work.

In my individual capacity and in my capacity as Chairman, I wish to express my gratitude to Mrs. Sipila and to pledge her our full support in the pursuit of her noble task.

I would also like to thank the members of the Secretariat, and Mrs. Bruce in particular, who, as can be seen from the excellent document submitted to the Consultative Committee, have brilliantly performed a very difficult task.