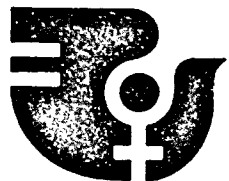




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Message from H. E. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister
of India to the World Conference of the
International Women's Year

It is a worth-while effort on the part of the United Nations to celebrate an International Women's Year. I congratulate Madame H. Sipila for the hard work she has put in. But for her enthusiasm and persistence I doubt if Governments and voluntary organizations would have taken so much interest. I send greetings to the eminent women gathered in this Conference.

Women are not weak in themselves but because they are handicapped from birth, by customs and social attitudes, they have no chance of developing their innate strength. Women's emancipation owes much to the support, and in India even public initiative, of men leaders. However, a large number of educated men in all countries are treating this year as something of a joke.

People talk and write as if every woman were all women and every man all men. But we know that each individual is a combination of male and female genes in varying degrees. How can we consider woman's evolving role without noting the changing role of man? In the affluent countries and amongst our own urban upper classes, man is no longer the hunter, the protector, the sole provider. Altering social and economic conditions have been affecting sex roles. Because of the complexities of urban living and the need for population control, large families are being discouraged. Motherhood no longer has its old halo, nor is it so time-consuming. Hence, whether we like it or not, the more sophisticated a society, the greater the blurring of the hitherto clearly defined characteristics of the two sexes.

The consciousness of rights is not confined to women. It is part of the struggles of all those who have not had a fair deal. But it would hardly be correct to assume that men are liberated. Who have men to blame except themselves? They are imprisoned by their commitment to the status quo and the fear of change, especially in a manner which may threaten their supposed superiority.

Men, and unfortunately even women, are conditioned by our man-oriented society. We tend to accept norms which men have made without questioning their validity. Instead of imitating men, should not the norms themselves be examined in depth? Women should have equality of opportunity and programmes

for their health and education, employment and better conditions of work. But surely this is not the sum total of what we ask. So long as woman has within her the archaic seed of dependence, no legislation or society can ensure her rightful position. Status is the outcome of history, heritage and social and economic environment.

There is confusion as to the meaning of equality. It is a question merely of laws, jobs or sexual mores, the emergence of a pattern of unisex where male and female are indistinguishable in their responses, action and contributions, or is it an opportunity for partnership in a joint endeavour? In Tagore's play, "Chitra", the heroine says to her husband:

"I am no Goddess to be worshipped nor yet the object of common pity to be brushed aside like a moth with indifference. If you desire to keep me by your side in the path of danger and daring, if you allow me to share the great duties of your life, then you will know my true self."

A lower status and lesser opportunity for women hampers the growth of human race as a whole. It affects the lives of men themselves.

Mankind is confronted with cataclysmic challenges. Man has viewed the earth as a unitary globe from the heights of space. Yet on earth he seems unable to take a total view. Needless hardship persists. There is poverty and its attendant problems. There is growing violence. There is a dehumanization of institutions and sterile cynicism. In the search for immediate palliatives, let us not allow the human dimension, the spirit of man, to diminish. Can woman offer perception and compassion and a total vision as regards the equitable distribution of the world's resources of knowledge, goods and services, so essential to survival?

What is her reaction to the cosmic need of preserving the purity of the earth, of its waters and its air, of saving species of animals, birds and plants from threatened extinction and above all, what can woman do to bring about harmony within nations and peace in the World? If her responses are trivial, how can she rise in stature? Stature is a state of being, a matter of confidence and responsibility. Woman's stature will be determined by her capacity to see with clarity and sympathy, and by her will to act.
