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Closing Address, Fourth World Conference for Women

Beijing, 15 September 1995

We came here to answer the call of billions of women who have lived, - and of billions of women who will live. We now need a tidal change, - Women will no longer accept the role as second-rate citizens.

Our generation must answer that call. Undoubtedly, we have moved forward. But the measure of our success cannot be fully assessed today. It will depend on the will of us all to fulfill what we have promised.

The views expressed here, - and the news which escaped from here, - will irrevocably shape world opinion. The story of Beijing cannot be untold.

What will be remembered? Zealous security? The palms of policemen? Visas not granted? Yes, but such practices cannot, and will not, long endure. Let us today count our strategic victories, not the tactical defeats. What we have achieved is to unbracket the lives of girls and women.

Now we must move on. All history of liberation struggles tells us that life, freedom, equality and opportunity have never been given. They have always been taken.

We cannot maintain the illusion, that someone else is going to do the job and establish equality with men. Women, and men working with us, men who understand, we all must fight for that freedom.

Today we know that women's contribution to the economy are decisive for growth and social development. We know that countries will continue to live in poverty if women remain under the heel of oppression. We know the costs of a continuing genderized apartheid.

Today, there isn't a single country in the world - not one - where men and women enjoy equal opportunities. So we must go back from Beijing,

- go back to the shantytowns of Third World megacities,
- go back to the croplands at the desert's edge in Africa,
- to the indigenous communities of Latin-American rain forests
- go home to change values and attitudes.

But not only there.

- no, we must go the boardrooms,
- to the suburbia of Europe and North America.
- to all of our local communities.
- to our governments

and to the United Nations' headquarters.

This is where change is required. Both in the North and in the South. What must be done to fulfill the hopes and aspirations of generations living and yet unborn?

Not only must women become free and equal to make choices about their own lives.

Not only must women have the right, the formal and protected right, to take part in the shaping of society.

No, far more, women must make use of that right. Women power is a formidable force. Women's values have a lot to give.

We need women at all levels of management and government - local as well as national government. We all agree that women must have education, not only experience - but we still are far from a world that makes use of it.

To take one example from the political field; There are cabinets and parliaments in the world with few or even no women. This situation cannot and will not last. And if the transition towards more real political representation is sluggish, affirmative action will work. It did, in Scandinavia.

When I first became prime minister 15 years ago, it was a cultural shock to many Norwegians. Today, four years olds ask their mummies: "but can a man be prime minister?"

We are adopting a comprehensive Platform for Action. All of its elements are important in this Agenda for change. Let me focus on some of its most compelling thrusts:

We agree that women's education is essential. This year's Human Development Report makes its emphatically clear: The economic returns on investing in women's education are fully comparable to those for men. But the social returns from educating women far exceed those of educating men. Schooling of girls is one of the unlocking keys to development.

There has been a difficult debate on how Beijing should define the human rights of women.

As if there could be one set of human rights for men and another, more restricted one, for women.

I even have heard the following allegation from a country not to be named: "The West, to be frank, is attempting to impose its cultural pattern as an international model".

Wrong, most countries are today strongly defending their own cultures. And there is more respect and mutual understanding of the value of other cultures and religions than ever before.

But the point is a different one: There are limits to the practices that countries can expect the international community to accept, or condone, even when such practices have deep cultural roots. This is where human rights enter the picture.

Violence against women, also domestic violence, can be said to be part of a "cultural pattern", in most countries including my own. We receive too many appalling reports of plain wife beating.

And clearly, freedom from violence and coercion must apply also in the sexual sphere of life. This conference has rightly made clear what the existing human rights must mean in practice.

The state becomes an accomplice if violence against women is seen as a separate cultural category of behavior extraneous to the realm of justice and law enforcement.

There are stains on the world map of girl-child maltreatment. Genital mutilation of girls is just that. It does not become sacrosanct or elevated beyond the realm of politics, just because that practice can be said to be part of a "cultural pattern".

We are familiar with the terrible discrimination against girls, even before birth. What has obscurely been described as "pre-natal sex selection", and the fatal neglect of infant girls, are tragic testimonies.

There are often ancient root causes of such practices. But they are committed by people who live today. Why are there astonishingly more boys than girls in certain countries? The question may be unpleasant for governments, who do not encourage these crimes. But we will all be found guilty if we close our eyes.

Why are girl children given less and poorer food than their brothers? Why do they receive less health care and less education? Why, are they subjected to the horrible tradition of sexual exploitation?

Ingrained, centuries-old attitudes are not easily changed, but these which I have mentioned must be. The task requires vigorous action on the part of governments, religious groups and private, non-governmental organizations.

Greater equality in the family is to the good for men, women and children. The allegation that this Conference is against motherhood and family is plainly absurd.

Today, we recognize that poverty has a gender bias. Increasingly, poverty discriminates between men and women.

The myth that men are the economic providers and women, mainly, are mothers and care-givers in the family has now been thoroughly refuted.

This family pattern has never been the norm, except in a narrow middle-class segment.

Women have always worked, in all societies - and at all times. As a rule they have worked harder than men, and - as a rule,- without pay and acknowledgement. Their contribution has been essential for national economies as well as to their families, where women have been the breadwinners, often quite superior to men.

As defined by statistics, societies have often kept women at arm's length.

Women who work 10-12 hours a day in subsistence agriculture may be registered as "housewives" in the national censuses.

But overlooking women's contribution to the economy has had more severe damaging effects. Often women cannot even obtain a modest loan to become more independent and productive. In many countries, women own nothing, they inherit nothing and are unable to offer security. On top of that laws often work against them.

No, women will not become more empowered merely because we want them to be, but through change of legislation, increased information and by redirecting resources.

Ministers of finance and planning may rue their former practice faced with what Beijing says about the economic role of women. Unleashing women from the chains of poverty is not only a question of justice. It is a question of sound economic growth and improved welfare for everyone. It is high time that we genderize development plans and government budgets.

The 20/20 concept is a promising path forward. It requires mutual commitment, the solidarity of the international community and the responsibility of each national government to provide basic social services. It is not possible to meet the aspirations of our people, nor to fulfill our commitments without allocating at least 20 per cent of national budgets to basic social services. And - those 20 per cent need to be genderized. Women's needs must prevail over military cultures and military budgets.

We learned a lesson at the Population Conference in Cairo last year. Improving the status of women and sound family planning is the key to lower fertility rates. The risky pattern of "too many, too soon, too late and too close" is also strongly detrimental to the survival of infants and children. There is no morality in condemning women to a life of perpetual childbearing and fatigue. Where appeals for justice for women have not been listened to, perhaps the necessity of a sounder economy and sounder population trends may.

Fortunately, we managed to erect a dyke against the stormy waves threatening the Cairo consensus. But here in Beijing we managed more than just a defence of past achievements. When I said at the Cairo conference that, at the very least, we should decriminalize women who had seen no other solution than to go through an abortion, it caused an uproar. And I fail to understand, why also here in Beijing - why those who

most vocally speak for what many of us favour, a caring society where all women can safely have their children, why they have held so strongly that these most dramatically difficult decisions should be cause for public prosecution.

We should focus on human suffering, not on recrimination against the weakest and most vulnerable.

Every second a baby boy and baby girl are born into this world of diversity and inequality. They all deserve love and care, a future and opportunities. There is nothing so thoroughly, - so unconditionally trusting as the look in the eyes of a newborn girl or boy child. From that privilege, we must depart, and make ourselves worthy of the look in those eyes -