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**Statement at the Media Encounter for the
International Conference on Population
and Development**

by

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1994 International Conference on
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Cairo, Egypt

4 September 1994



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Secretary-general of the International Conference
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Executive Director, United Nations Population Fund
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Twenty-four hours from now, President Mubarak will open the International Conference on Population and Development. It will be the first act of a historic meeting; but it will also be the last scene in a three-year drama.

The result is the conference document which will be discussed this week, the draft Programme of Action. We have come so far because of hard work by thousands of individuals, representing governments and non-governmental organizations, who sat through three years of preparations.

The process started in 1990, when I was appointed Secretary-general of the Conference by the United Nations General Assembly. We set out to involve as many individuals and groups as possible, the unofficial as well as the official representatives of the people. I believe we succeeded; this Conference has involved at one time or another some 4000 non-governmental organizations. We made special efforts to involve women, in the belief that women have been very poorly represented in the international process up to now. We succeeded there too: the Conference has included more women delegates, more women's organizations, and more NGOs representing issues of special interest to women, than any except the UN world conferences on women. We believed, and continue to believe very strongly, that women's interests can be adequately represented only by those who know at first hand what women think; preferably, that is to say, by women themselves.

The controversy around one or two aspects of the draft Programme of Action threatens to obscure its main purpose. In fact, the Programme of Action supports both religious precepts and worldly practice. It supports and seeks to strengthen the family. It supports and seeks to strengthen the most vulnerable members of society. It supports and seeks to strengthen the weakest members of the international community. It is above all a document based on moral grounds. The Programme of Action is not laying down the moral law; but it includes the moral dimension.

The Conference has some serious discussion to do. But the bulk of the debate will concern execution, not fundamentals. The fundamentals are already largely agreed.

To clear up possible misunderstandings, let me explain what the Programme of Action is and what it is not. The Programme is a free and equal agreement among nations. Everything in the Programme supports the rights of nations to make law or policy; in fact the Programme is intended to strengthen countries' power to make policy that works. Each country will interpret the draft Programme of Action in the light of its own law, customs and culture.

The final Programme of Action will be designed by all the nations represented here. No one State can impose its views on others: on the contrary, each nation has the opportunity to ensure that its problems are addressed and suggestions for solutions heard. This is of course



the essence of the work of the United Nations: to analyze and present the facts, to provide a forum for informed discussion and debate, and finally to reach agreement on the actions required.

The draft Programme of Action emphasizes people rather than numbers. It concentrates on the individual's quality of life and wellbeing; it takes a wide view of reproductive health and personal choice. A key objective is to meet the needs of families and individuals, especially women. This means eliminating discrimination against girls and women, and ensuring that they have equal access to the services they need for a full healthy and equal life. These include education, economic opportunities and rewards, and reproductive health and family planning services.

Equity and equality for women is a matter of social justice. In many if not most societies, girls start life at a disadvantage compared with boys, and this comparative disadvantage continues throughout their lives. They have been bypassed by development programmes, even those aimed at defeating poverty. Girls are more likely to have health problems in infancy, but they are less likely to get proper treatment. They are more likely to be malnourished, but they are less likely to benefit from feeding programmes. They are more likely to be illiterate, but have less opportunity to correct that deficiency in later life. They can expect to work longer hours for less pay, but they can expect fewer opportunities for training or access to credit.

On the grounds of social justice alone, I believe there is the strongest possible case for emphasizing equality for women. But the case is even stronger than that. As many countries have now demonstrated, higher literacy, better health and slower population growth are the best basis for economic development. And the fact is that none of these aims can be achieved without involving women as actors and agents as well as beneficiaries.

As it stands now, the draft Programme of Action accurately reflects the views of the 170 nations involved in drafting it. It is their document and their property. They have already accepted nearly nine-tenths of it. They have certainly proposed some bold steps in the Programme of Action; but the proposals are firmly based on 20 years of experience in population programmes. The fact that the document advocates specific action in well-defined areas is evidence that countries and communities are willing to come to grips with their population problems.

The measures called for in the Programme of Action are simple and undramatic. They call for no great strides in technology or vast transfers of resources from north to south.

Implementing the Programme will however call for commitment to change and dynamism. Based on the highest of moral and ethical principles, it is a reminder to every country that they are collectively responsible for the quality of life of every individual.

This is the real challenge of the Programme. We must not allow poor health care in pregnancy to take the lives of 500,000 women and to destroy the health of ten times that number, to say nothing of the 3 million infants' lives lost in the first week of life as a result of poor pregnancy management. That is morally unacceptable.

We must also look squarely at the facts about abortion. There may be as many as 50 to 60 million abortions a year. This is a serious threat to women's lives and health. Between 70,000 and 200,000 lives are lost each year as a result of abortion.

The facts are not in dispute. Nor are the objectives in dispute--to reduce the incidence of abortion to a minimum. Nor is there any disagreement on the most effective means--to provide family planning services to all women and men who need them. The delegates to this Conference will decide on the appropriate response to enable and encourage action.

The outstanding questions are important, but they should not be allowed to overshadow the great progress we have made. Thanks to the experience of the past, we have a very specific, very candid draft document. By the time this Conference is over, I hope the Programme of Action will be part of the future.

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro