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OLOF PALME

With reservations for amendments

Speech by Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme  
at the UN Conference of International Women's  
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1975 has been proclaimed International Women's Year by the United Nations. Throughout the world, efforts will be increased to create equal conditions of life for men and women.

Women's conditions betray dramatic differences from country to country. Socially and economically the struggle for women's liberation is being carried on from vastly disparate points of departure. Against such a background, it may seem impossible to evolve a program for common action. It would be easy to use this as a reason for leaving it up to each country to solve its problems by itself. The fact that women have attained equality neither in the rich nor in the poor countries may be used to sustain the view that the problems of women are separate from the problems of the development of society at large, and that the work of the International Women's Conference has to be limited accordingly.

In my opinion, we have to draw the exact opposite conclusion.

The differences among women's conditions reflect the tremendous gaps characteristic of our world to-day. It is the injustices and inequalities between nations and within them which also basically determine the course of women's lives. Or, as our host country's President Echeverría has pointed out, "No woman is more discriminated against than she who does not have bread or a school or medicine for her children. That is the worst form of exploitation and discrimination against women which results from the unjust international economic situation".

Therefore, the work for equality between men and women cannot be isolated - it has to be done in its approached social and political contexts, within each separate country and within the international community.

To-day mankind is faced with unique challenges. The momentum of economic forces which the poor countries have had to struggle against for so long, now threatens to

demolish the foundations of all the gains. The environment - our air, our water, our land - are menaced by poisoning and pollution. Finite natural resources are rapidly being exhausted. The number of inhabitants on our earth is growing with considerable speed. The supply of food is insufficient for the majority of mankind.

The gap between poor and rich is widening. Millions of people are being forced to live a life of poverty, misery and hunger in an unrelenting struggle for survival. This is the reality which the overwhelming mass of the women - as well as men - of the world encounter. If we are going to liberate women we are going to have to change these conditions.

The liberation of both men and women from oppression and poverty first of all requires that a country has achieved the right of self-determination. When political independence has been won, it is time to strive for economic freedom which provides the basis for social and cultural progress.

This work is being carried on in many places. It absorbs countries which, although still

poor, are on the threshold of tremendous constructive endeavours. They are inspired by a strong faith in the future, and in their power to succeed in transforming their daily lives. They are profoundly conscious of their rights. They have learned to unite and to join forces to make their voices heard.

Together they are calling for a new economic order in the world, not only as a basis for their own development but also to determine relations among the nations and peoples of the earth. The present system enables a minority of highly developed countries to dominate the world scene. Within the framework of the United Nations, the developing countries are working to establish a more equitable order.

The Sixth Special Session of the UN General Assembly adopted a Declaration and a Programme of Action on the Establishment of a new international economic order. It deals with each country's right to its own natural resources. It deals with economic independence. It deals with increased aid. It deals with participation in international decision making.

These demands are fundamental. They constitute the common plea of the poor peoples to the international community. Whether this plea is to be respected depends essentially on the behaviour of the rich countries.

There are countries - privileged countries - which regard these demands as a threat. Instead, they should be met with respect and openness. They are expressions of the will of the poor countries to participate in constructive international work. A shift of power in favour of the poor countries - which is the essence of these demands - will facilitate broad international cooperation on the global issues of justice. This is the only road to a world in peace, freedom and true community.

This is of immediate importance for people's conditions of life for survival, for economic and social progress, for women's liberation.

Thus the efforts to achieve equality between men and women must be integrated with the struggle for economic and social equality within and between nations. It is in this development that the conditions are created for the emancipation of women.

But economic and social progress alone does not suffice. This we can easily learn from observing the development in the rich countries.

Measured in economic and social terms, the processes of development have made great strides in these countries. As to equality between the sexes, little has changed.

Certainly it is true that most of the formal barriers between women and men have been broken down. Women usually have the same right to education, equal pay for equal work and generally have access to all sorts of jobs.

But in reality women in the industrialized countries are born into a life which is essentially different from that of the men. A woman is expected to assume her major part of the responsibility for the home and for the children. She is expected to be content with a job which is relatively lower-paid and usually more routine in its nature. The opportunities for large numbers of women to shape their own lives are in reality limited.

The basis for this was laid in earlier stages of history. Let me illustrate this by describing parts of my own country's history.

In less than a hundred years, Sweden has grown from a poor agrarian country into a highly industrialized nation. We have been blessed in many ways. We have had peace for over 160 years. We have been spared colonial domination.

We have been richly endowed with natural resources. Industrialization and, above all, enormous amounts of human labour made it possible to take advantage of these assets. Through the democratic process we have transformed society in such a way that everybody has been able to share our advances. This has provided the basis of altered conditions for both men and women. But for women the path towards professional freedom and economic independence proved to be longer and more difficult.

In the early stages of industrialization, when the profit motive and capital-owning interests governed the course of events, women were exploited as a source of cheap

labour. At the same time, they were heavily burdened with work in the home. Therefore, many women chose to leave the labour market. To take care of home and children appeared to be a better life than to toil in a hard and inhuman work environment. The woman turned into a reserve asset of the labour market. But the changes of society have created new conditions for women. Now they legitimately require equal job opportunities. They demand their rights to choose their own work. and their right to self-support.

Therefore, we have consistently made efforts to offer women the opportunity to re-enter working life. The basic pre-condition for this has been a concerted policy of employment. This active labour market policy has encouraged tens of thousands of women to seek employment outside the home. It has stimulated women with insufficient professional training and lacking experience of working life, to enter into education parallel with practical employment. This has strengthened their position on the labour market and enhanced their self-confidence.



Measures have also been introduced to favour women directly. Of all jobs which are financed by state funds in less developed areas of Sweden, women now fill about half. In many parts of the country special support is given to women who apply for work in traditionally "male" jobs, in industry.

We think we have made considerable progress. During the past three years, some 150,000 women have entered the labour market. During the last slow-down of the business cycle female employment even increased. To-day women constitute about 40 percent of the labour force in Sweden. Women in a growing extent go into secondary and higher education. This has been an important prerequisite for this positive development.

Still, progress is far from complete. Women's position in working life still remains weaker than men's. It is more difficult for them to get jobs, they encounter resistance when they try to re-enter the labour market, they are filling the lower-paid occupations. They often choose lines of education which lead to traditionally "female" jobs. Therefore, our endeavours must continue, and be broadened and intensified.

We have to expand society's facilities for child care. When women as well as men go out to work, society has to be organized accordingly. This is vital in order to provide children with a stimulating and diversified environment in which to grow. It fortifies women's ambitions to achieve equality in working life.

The discussion has now been further broadened. As a consequence of the demand that it should be possible for both men and women to be able to combine having a job with raising children, the need for a shorter working day becomes stronger and stronger.

At the same time, this reflects how the Swedish discussions on equality no longer concern the conditions of women alone, but also those of men. There is a growing insight that a changed role for women requires a changed role for men. For a long time, the role of the man has simply been taken for granted. But men, too, have been bound by traditions and expectations. They have assumed the sole responsibility for providing the family support, they have had occupations which often entail great health risks and physical strain. They have had much too little time for contact with their children.

Thus we also speak of men's liberation. A man's life, too, can be enriched if an altered view of responsibility and the division of labour in the family can achieve practical application.

These demands are being presented with growing force, particularly by the younger generation. They have visions of a society where the resources of men as well as women are utilized by providing everyone with the opportunity of doing meaningful work, of having close relationships both with adults and children and of taking active part in forming an society.

The Swedish social structure of the twentieth century has been rooted in a vital democracy, which has involved broad segments of the people. But it has been a democracy dominated and led by men. Women have created the condition for men's involvement - by taking charge of the practical, time-consuming chores of the household and child-raising. Meanwhile women themselves have had little opportunity for political work.

We are now making extensive demands on the continued transformation of society to bring about the emancipation of women, to broaden the sphere of men and to allow more room for the needs of children. It is thus necessary that many more women get involved in these activities, in trade unions, in politics and in organizations. It is crucial to the capacity of a democracy to fulfill people's needs. This is not possible if a great portion of the citizens - of the women - are left out of participation and responsibility

Many of the nations which have lived under oppression are now in the midst of a struggle for national liberation, the prerequisite for all progress. Violence and repression know no difference between man and woman.

Therefore, in many places both men and women are participating in this struggle. And this also has to mean sharing in the labours of construction of new societies.

If women are kept outside the struggle for freedom, outside the social structure, their isolation can be used to put the brakes on the drive toward further democratization. Thus a decisive battle against all forms of discrimination is essential, whether it is

founded on laws, traditions or cultural patterns, so that women and men can participate on equal basis in the struggle against oppression and poverty. To build a society on inequality between men and women means a waste of human resources. Progress presupposes national independence, but also the full participation of the people in building a new society.

Thus we can formulate certain general principles which are internationally valid for the work toward equality between men and women. But for the concrete, practical tasks of building up a society characterized by equality there are no general models. These actions must be carried out within each country on the basis of its own needs and conditions. The goal is one and the same. However, there are many roads to this goal.

It is up to each nation to raise the issue of women's conditions, and to work out the means by which women's and men's self-realization can be achieved.

This is the commitment implicit in the World Plan of Action which the United Nation has presented to this Conference. It lends support

to the strivings within each country to apply the principles of equality which have been put forth in the commonwealth of nations. Their realization means common action and a deepening of international unity.

Thus the industrialized countries must make their contributions and lend their support to the developmental efforts of the poor countries themselves, and to development toward equality and justice in the world. This by no means prevents us from working in our own countries for social progress and concentrated efforts to ensure men and women equal rights. The pressing needs in the developing countries must not be used as an alibi for lack of vigilance toward injustices in our own societies. Instead a national policy of equality is the strongest support for international solidarity.

The Women's Year proclaimed by the United Nations has already filled an important function. People all around the world have begun to discuss women's conditions seriously. It has become possible to question injustices suffered in silence for generation after generation. More and more men and women have become aware of the absurdity that we - in our time - cling to life styles based on

out-dated conceptions and mistaken views about the roles of men and women. Prejudice has been laid bare. The exposure is in itself a step toward its elimination. Women have gradually become more and more aware of their capabilities and rights. Out of this awareness grows self-confidence, an increased ability to liberate oneself and to contribute to building the society.

Thus an important foundation has been laid for success in the endeavours expressed by this Conference. It can provide constructive ideas, lines of direction and in the end solidarity. But to achieve results in our daily lives a patient and persevering reform work has to continue.

It will be an important task for the delegates at this Conference to carry the work forward, to see to it that the struggle for equality between men and women becomes an integral part of social reform in all nations. Together we shall work for equality, progress and peace in one world.