

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean
ORGANISATION MONDIALE DE LA SANTE
Bureau régional de la Méditerranée orientale



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المكتب الإقليمي شرق المتوسط

WHD-TUN

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from

DR HUSSEIN A. GEZAIRY

REGIONAL DIRECTOR

WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

to the

**INTERCOUNTRY MEETING ON STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN
COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMMES
IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION
(A FOLLOW-UP TO THE FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN,
BEIJING, 1995)**

Hammamat, Tunisia, 17–20 April 2000

Your Excellency, the Minister of Public Health,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to this intercountry meeting on strengthening the role of women in community-based programmes in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. In particular, I would like to welcome, and express my appreciation to, His Excellency Dr El'Hédi M'henni, Minister of Public Health, for kindly agreeing to host this meeting and providing the necessary facilities for its success. I would also like to

express my thanks to the Arab World Regional Office of the International Planned Parenthood Federation for sponsoring this meeting jointly with WHO. I would especially like to express my appreciation to all of you who, in spite of your busy schedules in your own countries, have agreed to come here and assist in reviewing and discussing the achievements and constraints related to implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

One of the major approaches to development, identified by eight world conferences during the 1990s, is the improvement of the status of women, including their empowerment. This has been recognized to be central to all efforts to reach sustainable development in all of its economic, social and environmental dimensions.

The Beijing Platform for Action which came out of the Fourth World Conference on Women is an agenda for women's empowerment. The Platform affirms the human rights of the girl child, including adolescent girls, and calls for addressing discriminations in education, food allocation and health care. It condemns harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation, and violence against women. Immediately after the Beijing Conference, most countries of WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region established National Committees for Women, developed national plans of action to implement their commitments and set up monitoring systems to regularly map the progress made towards mainstreaming gender in the national development process.

As a result of the Beijing Conference and its resolutions and commitments, the United Nations system, including WHO, formally endorsed the conclusion of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), stated in July 1997, that gender mainstreaming in all activities of the United Nations system is a high priority. Subsequently, at the Fifty-first World Health Assembly, WHO adopted the World Health Declaration, endorsing the health-for-all policy for the 21st century which underscores gender mainstreaming as a key value, along with equity, ethics and the right to health, for achieving Health for All.

The WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean, at its Forty-sixth Session in September 1999, discussed the topic of gender mainstreaming in development

policies and adopted a resolution calling for enhancing the role of women in major community-based development initiatives.

The basic principles of most cultures of the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region of WHO support, protect and promote women's rights, including their right to a high standard of health and quality of life. This principle of gender equity is enshrined in the religions of the Region, which all emphasize that men and women have equal responsibility for building and maintaining human life on earth; have the same rights to undertake any profession; have the same rights to education; and have equal responsibilities in the home. As it says in the Holy Quran...

Men have a rightful claim to be apportioned the proper share of what they have earned (by labour or inheritance), and women have a rightful claim to be apportioned the proper share of what they have earned (by labour or inheritance)...[4:32]

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There is cause for optimism. In many countries of our Region, more girls are going to school than ever before, and they are staying at school longer. Women are stepping forward as civic, political and intellectual leaders. New laws hold the promise of creating greater opportunities for women in the workplace and curbing violence at home. In spite of these achievements, women's potential in society remains unfulfilled. Women in the lower economic strata in particular have not always shared in the gains made so far. In many cases, laws have changed but culture and behaviour have not. And even in those places where there has been progress, major institutions have been slow to address the needs of families and communities revealed by changes in women's lives. Within the existing gender hierarchies, women are more prone to poverty. The absence of formal arrangements for enhancing the participation and leadership role of women in social and economic activities in most of the developing countries has limited their contribution as equal partners in development activities. Women's empowerment in socioeconomic activities is a prerequisite for achieving sustainable and people-centred development and for any significant reduction in poverty.

I wonder how many people have ever considered the extent of women's contribution to the social and economic development in the countries of this Region. Women work shoulder to shoulder with their husbands on farms, in small businesses and in many other areas of development. Yet, national economic plans and national statistics do not reflect their contribution accurately. One of the main tasks for an enlightened group such as yours is to facilitate and work towards reflecting the extent and magnitude of women's work.

What has WHO done to advance women's opportunities? The Regional Office established a unit for promoting the role of women in health and development to complement the Women's Health and Reproductive Health Unit, in order to cover both women's productive and reproductive roles. The women in health and development strategy cuts across all the programmes of the Organization and focuses on creating opportunities for women in the different health and environment programmes of the organization, with a special focus on enhancing the role of women in regional community-based programmes, such as basic development needs and quality of life, healthy cities, healthy villages and healthy communities. It also focuses on creating and enhancing the role on women in outreach programmes and in raising their awareness of public health issues and environmental health concerns.

Dear Colleagues,

The strategy of gender mainstreaming in WHO's programmes and projects needs multidisciplinary intersectoral action. This requires cooperation between governmental and nongovernmental organizations and good governance on the part of the government, the private sector and civil society, with men and women participating together in decision-making at all levels. The strategy and plan of action needs to be evaluated periodically for relevance, and for obstacles impeding women's development, such as violence and harmful traditional practices, which need to be addressed.

The key objective of this intercountry meeting is to review and discuss the achievements and constraints related to the Beijing Platform for Action in the areas of health and development. Also, you are expected to develop country and regional guiding plans of action for building capacity to implement the regional strategy and plan of action endorsed by the Regional Committee in 1999. In this connection, I wish to urge you to pay special

attention to recommending plans and measures that put a high priority on raising women's status so that they may assume their rightful role in the family and in social and economic development.

I wish you all a fruitful, creative and productive time in these four days of meeting and look forward to receiving the output of your joint reflections and deliberations.

Thank you.