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Statement by Mrs. Maj-Britt Sandlund, 4 March 1975

Maj-Britt Sandlund

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IWY

Statement by Mrs. Maj-Britt Sandlund, Swedish delegate to the Consultative Committee for the World Conference of the International Women's Year at its meeting on March 4, 1975

Madame Chairman,

First of all, Madame Chairman, on behalf of my Delegation I would like to congratulate you on your election as Chairman of this Committee. With your wide experience of international organizations, as well as with your experience in the work for promoting equality between men and women, we are confident that the work of this Committee will be successful.

We would also like to congratulate the Assistant Undersecretary General, Mrs. Helvi Sipilä, and her staff, for the draft World Plan of Action, and Mrs. Bruce, who so ably has introduced it. It is an excellent piece of work, and constitutes a good basis for our deliberations in this Committee.

It is our understanding that the procedure for the work of this Committee will be to discuss the draft Plan chapter by chapter. Therefore my delegation does not wish to comment on the draft Plan in detail at this stage, but would now like to make a few general remarks on the vital issue of establishing equality between men and women.

In areas where people are under colonial rule, and in countries where people are fighting for national independence, it is of utmost importance that both men and women join in a concerted effort to combat colonial oppression and fight for national independence.

In countries where people are denied basic political and human rights it is equally important that both men and women join in the efforts to achieve these fundamental rights. Not until these basic prerequisites are secured can an effective platform for an economic and social liberation be established.

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In the work towards economic independence and social justice the promotion of equality between men and women is an important aim. This aim must therefore be integrated into the total development process.

In order to promote equality between men and women the Swedish Government regards the following principles as fundamental.

Priority must in the first place be given to efforts to achieve equality between groups and between individuals in the society. The individuals' position in society is determined by the economic and social conditions in the society, as well as by sex. The issue of achieving equality between men and women must, therefore, be part of the general struggle for achieving equality in society. In the work towards equality between men and women, priority must be given to measures which strengthen the status of those women who are worst off with regard to education, training, employment and income, and who also lack all influence in society.

This principle must be duly considered in development policy and planning. In the strategy for the second United Nations development decade, the ultimate aim of development is "to bring about a sustained improvement in the well-being of the individual and bestow benefits on all". In order to achieve such an objective, there is a need for structural changes and the mobilization of both men and women in a concerted effort to establish economic and social justice and equality for the people as a whole.

A second basic principle is that a change in the traditional role of women must be accompanied by a change in the traditional role of men. In a society based on solidarity and equality, a new role characterized by similar opportunities and responsibilities for men and women will be the norm.

For women the change must be primarily in increased possibilities for employment and political participation, and for men in increased responsibilities for home and children.

A third principle which is fundamental and should be included in a World Plan of Action, is that women must have the same right as men to employment. This right must be enjoyed regardless of marital status.

The reason for this is that a strong position in the labour market considerably influences a woman's possibilities for an active participation in the community and in public life. It will also give her economic independence and social security as well as be beneficial for her family.

Furthermore, it will give her increased potential for exercising influence on society by participation in trade union activities. This experience will deepen her interest in taking an active part in political and other organizations.

Apart from these three principles, there are others equally important, which are so established and wellknown that I need not elaborate them before this Committee. I am thinking for instance of equal rights to education and training and equal pay for work of equal value.

Madame Chairman,

Governments have not only a responsibility to adopt principles. It is also their responsibility to achieve changes through active and concrete measures based on these principles. It goes without saying that such measures must be taken in accordance with different countries' social systems and cultural patterns.

I have stressed that women must have the same right to employment as men. I would now like to say a few words about what has been done in Sweden to this end. One of the most important reforms was a new family taxation system enacted in 1971. According to this system, married couples are individually taxed, independent of each other's income. This reform meant that a main obstacle to married women's entry into the labour market was eliminated.

The draft Plan mentions the establishment of multi-sectoral machinery within governments for accelerating the achievement of equal opportunities. In 1972 the Swedish Government set up an Advisory Council on equality between men and women, which is included in the office of the Prime Minister. Through two consultative bodies, the Council has secured a wide representation of governmental authorities, major trade unions, women's associations, as well as women from all parts of Sweden representing all kinds of occupations. According to the Council's instructions, its main tasks are to

deepen and develop a comprehensive view which should guide governmental policy on equality between men and women, and recommend measures to implement this policy. So far the efforts of the Advisory Council have been concentrated on improving women's status in the labour market.

I would like to mention some actions taken on the recommendations of the Council.

First, a substantial number of new positions have been created in the public employment offices to deal exclusively with improving the possibilities for women to get good jobs.

Secondly, within the framework of regional development policy, measures have been undertaken to counteract the traditional division of male and female occupations. Companies with a predominantly male labour force that are being established or expanded in regions where there is a shortage of employment opportunities, can be granted governmental loans and subsidies only if they employ at least 40 per cent women. The same principle is applied to industries with predominantly female workers - they shall employ at least 40 per cent men.

Thirdly, our Advisory Council has started a regional pilot project, which now covers six out of Sweden's twenty-four regions. The goal of the project, which includes extensive training, is to introduce women into industries with a vast majority of male workers. A large number of women have been employed under this project, for instance in engineering and in the wood industry. With few exceptions they are satisfied with their jobs. They have also proved to all the sceptics that women can manage all kinds of industrial jobs. Prejudice against women in traditionally male jobs is disappearing. The pilot project has influenced other companies with a similar manpower structure to employ more women. Another positive effect is that the working environment has been improved for all workers in these companies.

These are all examples of concrete reforms and projects which have already been started. The Advisory Council has also recently proposed a comprehensive programme for the state-owned companies. The

aim of the programme is to increase the number of women at all levels, including on the boards. Furthermore, the Council has recommended that the Government increase the representation of women in the central and regional governmental boards and committees.

The Government, as an employer, has a great responsibility to create equal opportunities for women and men within the civil service. To this end a special Government Committee has been set up and will present its proposals this year. I would also like to mention that the Government is presently going to set up another committee in order to examine to what extent military and civilian military occupations could be held by women.

All these reforms and measures that I have mentioned have contributed to a rapid increase in the employment rate among women, especially married mothers with small children. This fact, together with the wish that men should take a more active part in the care of their children, has stimulated a discussion about the necessity of reducing daily working hours. The discussion is going on heatedly in political organizations, trade unions, and in the mass media.

Within the framework of family policy the expansion of day care centers and other child care facilities is of vital importance for equality between men and women. The Government stimulates the expansion of these facilities by substantial economic contributions.

In accordance with the principle that both parents have the same responsibility for the care of their children, the Swedish Government last year changed maternity benefits insurance into parenthood benefits insurance. The parenthood benefits are paid during a total period of seven months. During the period following the child's birth, the benefits are paid to that parent who stays at home and has the major part of the care and supervision of the child. The economic result will be the same, whichever parent stays at home. Working fathers and mothers also have the right to sickness benefits if they need to stay at home to take care of sick children.

I have previously stressed the importance of active measures regarding employment and family policy.

The Plan stresses the need for actions within a broad and multi-disciplinary framework, that is to say parallel reforms have to be carried out in all sectors in society. I would like to emphasize the importance of this.

Measures to improve equality between men and women must consequently be integrated in rural development, health and nutrition, family planning, town planning and so on.

My delegation would like to emphasize that actual equality cannot be achieved only through granting equal legal rights for men and women. The Plan states: "Special measures on behalf of women may be necessary where their status is particularly low and where discriminating attitudes towards them are strong." The Swedish Government has actively worked with the question of equality. Experiences from this work have clearly shown that such special measures will be required during a fairly long interim period. Such measures are also required to promote a greater involvement of men in traditionally female occupations and child care. This must be duly reflected in a World Plan of Action.

Madame Chairman,

The struggle for equality between men and women is universal but takes different forms in different societies. In some countries women are still fighting for equal legal and political rights. But even in societies that have formally granted equal rights for men and women, the struggle is far from over. Open and direct discrimination has been displaced by more refined forms of discrimination. However, a World Plan of Action must focus on the problems of women in developing countries. The reason for this is obvious. The majority of women lives in the developing countries. The situation of most of these women is aggravated by the impact of wide-spread poverty and often worsened by the developing process itself.

I dare say that the majority of those who through education, training and employment move to the modernized sector of the society are men. Women are left outside and behind. They form a majority of the world's untapped or under-utilized human resources. The overriding goal must be to mobilize the material and human resources

of society to combat unemployment and stagnation and achieve social and economic equality and justice between human beings regardless of sex.

During a period of almost three decades the United Nations has adopted basic principles regarding the status of women. What is needed now is active and concrete efforts to translate these principles into reality. That is why the adoption of a World Plan of Action will be a cornerstone in the work for equality between men and women.

The Plan stresses the need for national action and places the responsibility for the implementation of the Plan on the governments. In order to strengthen national efforts, international action is required to a far greater extent than ever before. This does not mean, however, that we intend to suggest the establishment of new institutions, but that issues concerning equality are dealt with in already existing organs and within the regular programs. We also think that, in order to make it possible for the General Assembly to follow systematically the measures taken by United Nations organs in this field, reports should be given yearly to the Assembly. This, of course, will put an extra burden on the Secretariat, which already in our opinion is understaffed. Therefore my delegation believes that the branch for promotion of equality between men and women should be strengthened. We also believe that the Commission on the Status of Women should be given a more important role.

Madame Chairman,

I have tried to give a few examples of the Swedish experience of some of the measures proposed in the draft Plan. During the subsequent meetings of this Committee it is the intention of my delegation to further comment on the paragraphs of the Plan.

Thank you, Madame Chairman.