

9 April 2001

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
at the All China Women's Federation's luncheon**

I am honoured to have the opportunity to participate in this luncheon. While in Beijing and having this honour to be the guest of the All China Women's Federation I cannot think of any more appropriate subject to start than the Fourth World Conference on Women. A conference commonly known in the UN and around the world as 'the Beijing Conference'. Altogether 47,000 women and men, attended the Beijing Conference and the parallel Huairou NGO Forum. It was the largest-ever gathering of government and NGO representatives at a United Nations Conference. At the Conference 189 countries unanimously adopted the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action. The people and the government of People's Republic of China deserve full praise for having hosted this conference.

Many consider the Conference as a turning point in the advancement of the status of women and gender equality. Having gone over the Platform of Action to prepare my remarks for this occasion I tend to agree with them. It is indeed a very important document containing commitments that should be implemented very carefully by every government.

The basic goal of the Platform was the empowerment of all women in order to achieve sustainable, just and developed societies. It stated that the full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms of all women is essential for achieving this goal. It further emphasized that it is the duty of states, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights.

The special session of the General Assembly on Beijing +5 of last June aimed at identifying practical ways to implement the commitments made. It emphasized areas which have gained importance since the Beijing Conference, such as access to decision-making particularly in peace keeping processes, gender-sensitive approaches to HIV/AIDS and the realization of women's full enjoyment of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. In this connection I should like to welcome the recent decision by the Chinese government to ratify the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and I hope that considerations will continue to enable full implementation of the Convention.

There are several other important commitments in the Platform, but I would like to take up one, which I consider very important. It is the situation of the girl child, a concern I have stressed throughout my tenure. The girl child of today is the woman of tomorrow. Over five years ago governments agreed in Beijing that 'for the girl child to develop her full potential she needs to be nurtured in an enabling environment, where her spiritual, intellectual and material needs for

survival, protection and development are met and her equal rights safeguarded'. Yet the reality today in many parts of the world is that girls do not have equal access to nutrition, physical and mental health care and education or enjoy the same rights, opportunities and benefits of childhood and adolescence than boys. In addition girls are often subjected to various forms of sexual and economic exploitation.

At the Millennium Summit last September the heads of state and government resolved to ensure that by 2015 children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling and that girls and boys will have equal access to all levels of education. If governments with the assistance of the UN system would make sure that this commitment is in fact implemented, it would make a huge difference for so many girls and boys and ultimately for the whole societies.

Although some notable gains have been made since the Beijing Conference, women worldwide continue to bear a disproportionate burden of poverty, illiteracy, dislocation, violence, poor nutrition, and ill health. Governments need to do more. NGOs and women's groups and associations such as yours have a key role to play to follow up that commitments made are implemented.

I should like to congratulate the women of this country and its government for having been very active in enhancing the status of women. China is a party to the Convention of All Forms of Discrimination against Women since 1980 and has made achievements in many areas of gender equality. In particular I should like to congratulate you on the high number of women in the China National People's Congress, which was over 20% in the last elections. This same trend is to be seen also in number of Chinese women working in the UN, where almost 50% of the staff members from China are women. I encourage the government and the women in China to continue to enhance the equal status and human rights of women in all aspects.

Before I conclude, let me touch briefly the issue of opening the UN to the outside world, an appropriate topic to take up when addressing women's movements such as All China Women's Federation. I have repeatedly said that better governance requires better and wider participation. In the era of globalization, the UN and national governments cannot do their work alone. Therefore, one of my priorities as President of the Assembly has been to reach out to civil society in order to fully benefit from its expertise and to ensure its involvement in our work. In the case of women's organization we know that their contribution and participation has been vital for the advancement of women.

At the Summit Declaration a call was made for enhanced partnership and co-operation with civil society, including the private sector. To fulfill this commitment, I have emphasized that we need to explore innovative ways to enable civil society to contribute to the work of the UN system. I will continue to keep this issue on my agenda and support all efforts to implement this commitment.

It has been a great pleasure to share some of my views on gender equality and advancement of women and I thank you for your attention.