

8 March 2003

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Jan Kavan,
President of the 57th Session of the General Assembly,
on International Women's Day**

On March 8 of every year we celebrate the International Women's Day. This year the theme of "Women Empowerment - key to achieving the Millennium Development Goals" is appropriate and on target. The Goals to be attained by the year 2015 are ambitious, though possible, and include: halving the number of some one billion persons living in extreme poverty and hunger on less than a dollar a day; achieving universal primary education for girls and boys given that some 113 million children do not attend school; empowering women and promoting equality between men and women; reducing child and maternal mortality rates and ratios respectively; combating deadly diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria; ensuring environmental sustainability and generating global partnerships for development with targets for aid, trade and debt relief.

If the Millennium Goals are to be achieved in the envisaged time frame, then it is imperative to enable the full participation of women in this endeavour. Women constitute more than half of mankind. They are, without exception, in all cultures, the predominant communicators and care givers. Hence the importance of their role in fostering a culture of peace and harmony amongst peoples, a culture of gender equality, a culture of sustaining the environment, a culture of mutual support across families, communities, and nations. Women and children represent 70 percent of the world's poor and two thirds of the world's illiterate population not to mention that 80 percent of the world's refugees and displaced persons are also women and children.

If the number of victims of extreme poverty and hunger has to be halved by the year 2015, then the women have to be empowered to achieve this goal for themselves and their families. It is recognized that when we educate a woman we educate a multitude, when we educate a man we educate one individual. Because of the traditional gender division of labour in all societies, where the male head of the family is expected to provide the economic means for the family, and the women are left at home to give birth to children and care for daily needs of the family, they become the main channel of communication with the baby from the moment of its birth. Therefore, their impact and influence can be decisive in fostering new attitudes in the sons and daughters, attitudes of living in peace and harmony with diverse racial and religious cultures, attitude of mutual respect in gender equality, for the environment, for prevention of diseases through safe water and sanitation habits, and so on. Women's role as communicators is also enhanced by virtue of the fact that most of the teachers around the world are women. If the women are educated and empowered, together with their male partners, we will constitute a mighty force to combat hunger, poverty, disease and environmental degradation. The inclusion of women therefore is indispensable.

For prosperity to flourish, we need peace and security. Women of all cultures know the deep pain of losing their beloved fathers, husbands and sons in armed conflict and wars. They would be harbingers of peace if allowed and empowered to participate in peace negotiating, peace building, peace-keeping and conflict prevention activities, in other words building and promoting a culture of peace.

Economic empowerment of women is a fundamental step towards eradication of poverty. The idea of micro credit to women is yielding dividends around the world. The concept of micro credit was an initiative of Professor Muhammad Yunus of Bangladesh. Through lending women small amounts of cash without collateral, and the ensuing success of the loan repayments, he revolutionized the concept of rural economic and social development, coupling capitalism with social responsibility. The concept of micro credit is being copied in 52 countries and the multilateral agencies are supporting micro credit projects around the world at the grass roots level.

Political empowerment of women has also yielded positive results wherever they have the opportunity to participate in decision making. To cite one example, the Panchayat system in India, (local bodies at the village level that are meant to ensure people's participation), which has always existed though dominated by male members, now has a minimum of 30 percent women constituents due to an amendment to the Constitution of India, providing for one third of the seats to be reserved for women. This has allowed women to use their empowerment in, for instance, improving local water and sanitation systems and educational facilities for the children in their villages, thus fostering sustainable development at the grass roots level.

The potential of information and communications technologies for advancement and empowerment of women is unlimited and should be tapped through training and capacity building.

There are many players and stakeholders in the aim to reach the Millennium Goals. Apart from the efforts of the UN family of organizations, multilateral organizations and civil society, the positive role of women also depends on the supportive attitudes of the local family unit, the local community in each village, in each town. In financing for development, the governments should promote participation of women in the allocation of aid. I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to all of the organizations and individuals for their tireless and sustained efforts to promote gender equality and thus enhance the chances of attaining the Millennium Goals for a better world for all.