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Strengthening Families for the World of Tomorrow

Address by Dr. Richard Jolly

Deputy Executive Director, Programmes

UNICEF

to the World NGO Forum Launching the International Year of the Family

Malta, 1 December 1993

The International Year of the Family brings a timely reminder: families are society's most basic structure. However much their forms may vary, their basic and best elements -- relationships based on reciprocal caring and support -- are unchanged. In the words of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, families remain "the fundamental group in society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members". The enduring importance of families can offer welcome stability in a world so dominated by change.

But families represent much more than caring, support and stability. They are for most of us the locus of our deepest human experience. Intimacy and passion, identity and self-hood, connection to the past and hope for the future -- all arise from this little nexus.

Because all the deepest human feelings have their source in the family, both the greatest good happens here (love, companionship, nurturing, growth) and the greatest evil (wilful destruction, violence, incest, at times even murder). That is why cliches and homilies so easily sound foolish. The family can be many things -- a source of love and support -- but it can also be a dictatorship, a patriarchy, a matriarchy, a commonwealth, a co-operative, a limited partnership. Children never have equal power with their parents and only rarely does a wife have the same power as her

husband.

Indeed -- too often -- families are the setting for deeply-entrenched inequality between men and women, the nurturing ground for attitudes and practices of discrimination against girls and violence against women. For millions of children, families -- sometimes unwittingly -- may also be the setting for gross exploitation of their earning power: their nimble fingers and trusting compliance are used to secure income at the cost of their education, their childhood, sometimes even their lives.

Some even question whether families are so oppressive, outdated or burdensome that they are no longer relevant to the changes and opportunities of modern society. These are real questions. But even as we ask them -- or some of our children ask them -- some of the answers are perhaps clearer and more positive than they seemed ten or twenty years ago. Families are still relevant. We must purge family structures of gender bias and experiment with new relationships within families and new forms of families attuned to the changing social context of the world today. But when all of this is done we may rediscover a new and deeper importance of families for the well-being of people all over the world.

The International Year of the Family gives us the chance to develop a fuller understanding of the rights and responsibilities of today's families -- and a clearer sense of the actions needed from governments and employers, from a wide variety of non-government groups and communities, to strengthen the best of family structures in a rapidly changing world. We have already made a start: both the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child acknowledge that families bear the primary responsibility for raising children and that communities and governments also have an important, supportive role to play. Indeed, Article 18 of the Child Rights Convention states that ..."States Parties...shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children". Let us use the International Year of the Family to transform these noble words into actions to strengthen and support families all over the world.

Families Today: A Kaleidoscope of Structures and Challenges

At the outset, it is important to recognize the kaleidoscope of forms and functions that now comprise the world's families. Thinking in terms of only one type of family, let alone one ideal, leads us to miss reality, to confuse analysis and to divert attention from serious solutions. I would like to focus on the special problems facing four kinds of families. In these remarks and in the discussion that follows I would like to suggest that we adopt the perspective so favoured by James Grant, Executive Director of UNICEF: turn every problem into an opportunity. We need to identify and understand problems for families in ways which open doors to creative and lasting solutions.

Families in Poverty

Much discussion of families in poverty focuses on families which have broken down. Such families have special needs requiring urgent attention. But it is not only these disintegrating families that require strong support. By far the greatest numbers of families in need, especially in developing countries, are "intact" but facing extraordinary pressures.

These families may be rural farmers attempting to make a living on limited land, perhaps compounded by insecure land tenure, conditions of drought, environmental deterioration and falling commodity prices. Or they may be families of migrants to an urban shanty town, struggling to earn a living by piecing together several physically-demanding and often dangerous jobs in the informal sector. Or they could be civil servants in one of the developing world's teeming cities, whose real incomes have shrunk to such low levels that even the bare essentials are extremely difficult to secure. There are parallels here with inner city families in industrial countries, squeezed by poverty and unemployment, often with drugs and violence as a major consequence.

For all such families, providing access to basic services and raising incomes and are critical. Health, nutrition, water and sanitation, education and family planning -- the "appropriate assistance" to parents envisaged in Article 18 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child -- are the basic services required. By removing the need to have children work the streets to contribute to the family's income, they can also play a key role in

keeping the family together.

But economic development is also needed to relieve some of the economic pressure on poor families, and for ensuring a better future for their children.

As part of a broader strategy to alleviate poverty, poor families need better access to productive assets including land, capital, appropriate technology, education and training. New approaches to providing credit to the poor, especially poor women, such as the scheme developed by the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, are among the most hopeful development innovations of the 1980s.

To counter the sense of powerlessness and even despair which so many poor families feel today we must reaffirm our support for the principle that child-rearing is the responsibility of not just one family but the whole community. This principle has long been practiced in Africa. Where the social fabric is rich in caring, supportive institutions families are much better able to cope with the effects of poverty.

In short, poor families need higher incomes, better access to basic services and productive assets and a supportive social environment that helps, not hinders, their efforts to secure a better life.

Families Headed by Women -- three times the burden

Almost a third of households world wide are now headed by women. At least one-third of families have a woman as their only income earner. In another one-third, women make a substantial contribution to family income. If a money value were placed on household work, the contribution of women in almost all families would double at least -- and the burden on women who are heading households would be seen to be even greater.

In the industrialized countries recent increases in women-headed households are linked primarily to rising divorce rates and to the increasing numbers of births out-of-wedlock. In developing countries the growing incidence of women-headed households stems chiefly from economic necessity and, in some cases, to a disturbing decline men's sense of family responsibility. In Latin America and the Caribbean, where, in some countries, over two-fifths

of households are headed by women, women have been forced to migrate to cities to find work. In sub-Saharan Africa the combined effects of economic stagnation and growing population pressures on deteriorating land have sent more and more men to the cities, leaving the women to cope with the many demands of rural life. A recent study of four countries found that women spend a substantial number of their reproductive years living without a co-resident partner: in Ghana the figure is 50 per cent, in Kenya 43 per cent, 20 per cent in Mali and 33 per cent in Senegal.¹ At the same time, marital dissolution (including widowhood, divorce, separation and remarriage) is surprisingly common in developing countries: recent data from selected countries revealed that the percentage of women aged 40-49 whose first marriage had dissolved was 35 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa, 24 per cent in Asia and North Africa and 34 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean.²

For the most part, women have not been relieved of their domestic duties in spite of taking on greater economic roles and becoming more involved in their communities. Women have become trapped in what has been called the "triple-day syndrome".³ For those who believe that women's greater role in the workforce has stimulated more equitable sharing of domestic duties between women and men, a recent study in Britain contains some sobering facts. Among the young couples in the survey 77% of the women do the cooking, 66% do the shopping, 75% do the cleaning and 85% do the laundry.⁴

Ironically, although women increasingly make a greater economic contribution to their families, households headed by women still figure disproportionately among poor families. This disappointing truth is the result of many factors working together. Women have less access to training and education than men: they command lower average wages; and they enjoy fewer time-saving technologies in their work. In addition, female-headed households typically have more dependents and fewer contributors to total household income. As a final blow, women's child support entitlements are often poorly enforced.

It is fairly obvious what needs to be done to support to these families. Women need better access to income-enhancing assets, especially education and training. This will have a positive impact on their productivity and their wages.

Child support laws and benefits packages need to be better enforced and sustained throughout the period when women are in the workforce.

More plentiful and affordable child care facilities would give women more labour mobility. This in turn will help them to escape the low-wage (part-time) job "ghetto".

Finally, for women in many developing countries inheritance and asset ownership laws urgently need to be reformed to make it possible for women to gain greater access to property and other productive assets.

In short, the time has come for an end to what UNICEF has termed the "apartheid of gender", which undermines the family as it oppresses women. For women-headed families income-enhancing assets, more effective child support laws, more responsible behaviour on the part of fathers, more and better child care and other legal reforms are critical.

Families of Children -- the most neglected of all

A disturbing phenomenon found all over the world but concentrated in the urban centers of developing countries, are "families" made up entirely of children. Children in these families may have lost their parents to war or to AIDS, or they may be the "social orphans" of extreme poverty. Global estimates suggest that up to 100 million children now spend most of their time on the street, working as petty traders, beggars and too often as prostitutes and petty criminals. Thirty million of these children actually live on the street, an estimated five million cut-off from all contact with their families.

Their needs are many. What can we do to help these children?

The first priority, whenever possible, is to reunite these children with their parents or other relatives. This is by far the best outcome, an outcome which the bulk of these children themselves desperately desire.

Reunification will often restore the children to a caring and responsive environment which has some measure of normalcy. Where reunification is not possible the children should be placed with another family, preferably a related family and preferably on a permanent basis.

Children who have been exposed to the trauma of war or famine have additional needs. Haunted by recurring images of horror or tragedy, these children require therapy and counselling. Such therapy is vital as a curative measure and as a tool for helping children to cope better should the traumatic event recur. It also plays a pivotal role in smoothing the integration of traumatized children into families that have not suffered such experiences. In poor, war-torn countries, a number of methods -- involving teachers, traditional healers, community leaders and parents -- have been used to bring effective and relevant therapy to large numbers of children.

Street children also need greater access to basic services -- especially education. This must be a top priority for any lasting solution to their difficulties. "Informal" education is especially appropriate since it tailors both the content and the schedule to the children's need to continue working.

This educational outreach needs to be part of an aggressive AIDS awareness campaign for street children, who are among the groups most highly at risk for contracting the disease.

But to make this possible, we will need to change the attitudes of political leaders and the public. They should be encouraged to view street children, not as hardened criminals but as young victims of conflict, abuse and poverty. Even the term "victim" may be inappropriate; these young people are often survivors, who have devised coping strategies against all odds.

These are big challenges but they barely begin to restore these children to a normal childhood of play and laughter. This is part of the tragedy. Play and laughter have extraordinary healing qualities; they belong to these children as a matter of right.

In short, street children need to be reunited with their families, better access to relevant education, and a social setting that recognizes and tries to alleviate their suffering.

The Poverty of Affluence

Families in the industrialized countries are beset by their own difficult challenges. Let me mention two in particular.

First, there has been a shocking increase in child poverty in some industrialized countries in the last fifteen years. Rising unemployment, slow economic growth, rapid increases in the cost of living and a dramatic shift towards low-wage and low-benefit jobs in the service sectors⁵ have reduced one in five children to poverty in the United States, and nearly one in ten in Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom.⁶ By contrast, child poverty rates in most of Western Europe and Japan have remained between 2 to 5 per cent.

Over the same period, governments in many industrialized countries have cut back sharply their support for family allowances, low-income housing, and welfare benefits and have moved away from universality in coverage.⁷

These economic pressures have coincided with other disturbing trends. The first is a severe squeeze on the time parents spend with their families: longer working hours for both parents, especially in the US and Britain, is robbing children of parental attention and supervision.⁸ Linked to a higher incidence of marital breakdown, is the enormous increase in the percentage of children without regular contact with their fathers. In the United States 26% of all children now grow up without their fathers, almost 2.5 times the proportion in 1960.⁹

The second set of problems facing families in the industrialized countries is emotional hardship rather than economic hardship, especially among children. Children of affluent parents are likely to spend more time alone than children in poor families. They are more likely to suffer from a low self-image tied to the feeling that they are just another competing demand on their parents' already overstretched time. On the side of parents, there is the disturbing realization that the qualities viewed as critical to career success -- single mindedness, efficiency and a preference for perfectionism -- are precisely the qualities least conducive to the proper nurturing of children.¹⁰

These economic and emotional pressures on families are closely linked to domestic violence, which affects scores of families in both developed and developing countries, as well as to behavioural problems in children including weak school performance, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse and, sometimes, suicide.

Among the measures required to alleviate the intense stress these problems put on families, five stand out.

First, we need to create a more supportive, family-friendly work environment -- one that accommodates the responsibilities of employees who are also mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, sisters, and brothers. This requires such work-place reforms as flexible work hours, affordable, on-site child care and paid parental leave. Reforms in the work ethic are even more important. Our cultures should reward parents who put family and children's needs first, not penalize or reprimand them. Skillfully planned, family-friendly policies can be profitable: studies show that family-friendly work places have less absenteeism, less turnover, better morale and higher productivity.

Second, the value of fatherhood should be more widely recognized. In recent years, much attention has been devoted to the expanding opportunities -- and the growing burdens -- of women as mothers, workers and public officials. We now need to give some attention to the role fathers play in families. As my friend and former colleague, Margaret Catley-Carlson, President of the Population Council noted recently "...there is no compelling reason why the father-child link is any less important than the mother-child link. At the level of program, policy, and social debate, there must be discussion of the value of the father's role, the expectations of fathers, and incentives for "good" fathering and sanctions for "poor" fathering".¹¹

Men's self-image should depend much more on being a successful husband and father, on playing a central and responsible role in family life. A growing body of evidence suggests that close and early father-child links -- what anthropologists call a high "paternal investment" -- greatly reduces the likelihood of violence in men, improves the achievement of girls and increases the likelihood that families will remain intact. Men who take a more active role in their children's lives are realizing that guiding a child's discovery of herself or himself and the world is one of life's great pleasures.

Legislative changes are also needed. Until paternity leave is a right, calls for better fathering will be mere hollow gestures.

Third, a preventive approach to family support is needed to alleviate stress

on affluent families. Domestic violence is one of the most devastating diseases affecting families today. Families at risk of violence, particularly against women and children must be identified. We urgently need to use every conceivable tool, especially communication within families and family counselling to develop non-violent solutions to conflict.

Fourth, children need well-targeted social policies, with entitlements indexed to inflation. This approach, used for the elderly in the 1980s, resulted in a dramatic reduction in poverty. We need to find ways to put these policy tools to work for children, especially to make up the ground they lost in the last decade.

Finally we need to re-discover the valuable role other family members play in child-rearing. Grandparents can be a great gift to parents as well as to grandchildren, especially in families hit by the time squeeze. So also can aunts and uncles. Many older family members, who are now living longer, healthier lives, suffer from having not too little but rather too much time and too few meaningful ways to spend it. While grandparents cannot and should not be thought of as a substitute for parents, they do have wonderful contributions to make. For children, loving grandparents can do so much to build a child's sense of self-worth and security. For parents they can offer much-needed support and encouragement. And, the close involvement of grandparents can be a powerful lesson to children that family extends beyond those who live together under one roof. It gently conveys to them the profound truth that the love and support shared among all family members is one of the defining characteristics of human society.

In sum, families in the industrialized world, indeed families everywhere, need a work ethic that recognizes family responsibilities, a deeper more profound understanding of fatherhood, measures to identify and assist families at risk of domestic violence, and social policies targeted particularly on reducing child poverty.

Putting Families First -- five points for priority action

Historians will surely regard the 20th century as the time when a series of social movements came of age. The international women's movement and the movement to preserve the environment are two recent examples. As we approach the 21st century, we need to use our international human rights

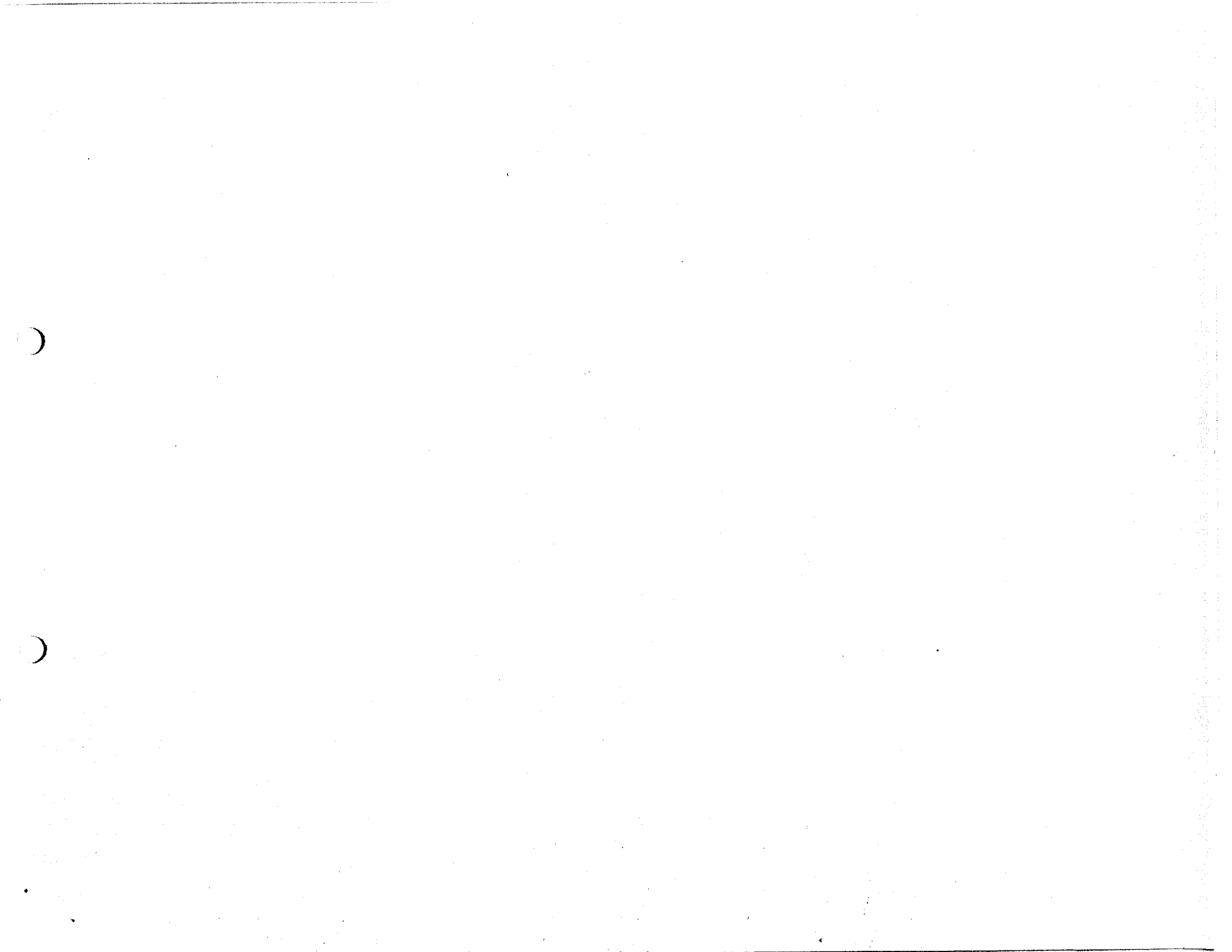
instruments -- the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child -- to build a movement for families. Five elements would be critical to such a movement.

First, we must promote more equitable partnerships between women and men, at all levels of society, but especially within families. Each and every one of us can work towards this. Family partnerships, grounded in mutual respect would, by their example, help children to grow up regarding boys and girls, women and men, as equals. No strategy would better root out the destructive gender bias still so prevalent in the world today.

This gender bias limits women's decision-making power within the family. If women had more decision-making power -- especially over their sexual and reproductive lives -- they would have fewer children, they would suffer fewer pregnancy-related problems, and they would stand a much better chance of protecting themselves and their children from AIDS. We know also that when women have greater control over financial resources their children are better fed and better educated. Indeed, one recent study undertaken in an urban shanty town in Mexico found that per capita income was distributed so much more evenly in households headed by women that even though they had lower overall incomes than households headed by men, all family members were better off.¹²

Second, a more active role for fathers in child-rearing is critical. This would go a long way towards implementing Article 18 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which emphasizes that "both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child... ". Efforts are already underway: Japan's Ministry of Education recently launched nation-wide seminars to teach and encourage men to become better fathers.

Third, communities must be encouraged to develop effective means for supporting families. These could include measures to identify and monitor families under stress, promotion of "good parenting" skills as well as emotional and perhaps even financial support to families facing difficult times. Substantial benefits would follow for children and as well as for society -- including a lessening of the feelings of alienation felt by many struggling parents today and a reduction in the incidence of several social problems plaguing, especially, the inner cities.



Fourth, governments need to develop comprehensive family support programmes which include paid parental leave, high-quality and affordable child-care, support for breastfeeding mothers, stronger measures for enforcing child support entitlements and special provisions for poor families. Several European countries already provide such support, with impressive results in terms of low child poverty rates. In developing countries these programmes should be combined with a range of measures to reduce poverty by improving employment opportunities, increasing access to productive assets including land, credit, capital, technology, education and training, and expanding access to adequate shelter and affordable basic services in health, nutrition, education, water and sanitation and family planning.

Fifth, international organizations and governments must be encouraged to view families as among their most important partners, the first line of defence and protection against all obstacles to human well-being, the building blocks for communities. In this effort, NGOs offer several advantages. Their grassroots orientation allows them to work side by side with families, encouraging the attitudinal changes I have advocated. At the same time, they exert considerable influence over policy-makers. And, they are well-organized. Putting the organizational skills of NGOs to work for families would certainly help to advance this movement.

By strengthening families, we strengthen children, and we strengthen society. Let us use this International Year of the Family to renew our commitment to nurturing and supporting society's most basic unit. And let work to ensure that the needs of families are at the center of the upcoming global conferences on population, social development and women.

Thank you.

1. See "Finding the Ties that Bind: Beyond Headship and Household", by Judith Bruce and Cynthia Lloyd, October 1992, one of a series of studies published by the Population Council and the International Center for Research on Women as part of their joint project on "Family Structure, Female Headship and Maintenance of Families and Poverty".
2. See "Family and Gender Issues for Population Policy" by Cynthia Lloyd, Population Council, presented to the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Population and Women, Gaborone, 22-26 June 1992.
3. See "Women and Families in International Development" by Georgianne Baker and Revathi Balakrishnan, in Families in Transition, Nancy B. Leidenfrost (ed.) Vienna: International Federation of Home Economists, p. 140.
4. "Women bear burden of failed dreams", by Chris Mihill, Guardian Weekly, September 12, 1993.
5. For a full discussion of the issues raised in this section see Child Neglect in the Rich Nations, a study for UNICEF by Sylvia Ann Hewlett, 1993.
6. Hewlett, op cit.
7. See "Government Expenditures for Children and Their Families in Advanced Industrialized Countries, 1960-85", by Sheila Kamerman and Alfred Kahn, International Child Development Center Occasional Paper, EDP 20, September 1991.
8. Hewlett, op cit.
9. See "Father Absence and Child Well-Being: Some of the Evidence", National Parenting Association Background Paper No. 1, October 1993.
10. Hewlett, op cit.
11. "Explosions, Eclipses and Escapes: Charting a Course on Global Population Issues", the 1993 Paul Hoffman Lecture, delivered by Margaret Catley-Carlson on June 7, 1993.
12. See "Women on Their Own: Global Patterns of Female Headship" by Nancy Folbre, March 1991, The Population Council/The International Center for Research on Women.