

FORUM ON WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP FOR CHILDREN

[This document, together with other information on the Special Session on Children, is available on the official site:

<http://www.unicef.org/specialsession>]

The Forum for First Spouses/Ladies on Women's Leadership for Children was convened in conjunction with the UN General Assembly's Special Session on Children to share best practices and examples of women's leadership for children as well as actions taken by First Spouses/Ladies as advocates for children. The Forum explored the potential for further action by First Spouses/Ladies as part of the Global Movement for Children and as follow-up to the Special Session. Participating in the Forum were 50 First Spouses/Ladies, 23 representatives from other countries and nine special invitees from the private sector, media/arts, academia and non-governmental organizations.

Mrs. Nane Annan opened the Forum, speaking of women that she had met in many countries and at all levels of society who were leaders in the care and protection of children. She noted that the almost 95 million people who took part in the *Say Yes for Children* campaign had voted the following critical actions among the most urgent global priorities: Educate Every Child, Stop Harming and Exploiting Children, Fight HIV/AIDS, and Leave No Child Out. UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy recalled that the *Say Yes* campaign was launched a little over a year ago as the first step in mobilizing a grand alliance of all forces in society: a Global Movement for Children dedicated to achieving a world fit for children.

Three young people, all 16 years old – Laura Kerstin Hannant of Canada, Bogdan Alexandru Rosu of Romania and Mandisa Nakana of South Africa, all 16 years old – shared some of the major concerns that the Children's Forum, held earlier in the week, wished to bring to the attention of the First Spouses/Ladies. These included:

- education and investing in girl children;
- stopping child exploitation and abuse;
- demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers into society; and
- helping AIDS stricken families that need to be cared for and kept together.

At the opening of the discussion, co-moderator Mme. Sadako Ogata cited some key challenges facing children and asked that the needs and rights of refugee children be included as priorities for action taken in connection with the *Say Yes* campaign.

In a three-hour discussion moderated by Mme. Sadako Ogata and Dr. Nafis Sadik, the participants:

- shared examples of women’s leadership for children at various levels;
- related experiences in promoting the cause of children, including the *Say Yes* campaign;
- identified factors which helped or hindered progress;
- conveyed lessons learned which could be applied to accelerate further progress; and
- made suggestions for expanding and sustaining the Global Movement for Children.

The Forum acknowledged that tremendous progress has been made with the protection and realization of children’s rights over the past 12 years. Much of this progress has been possible because of partnerships and alliances among different actors, including governments, civil society and communities, and through women’s leadership. Nevertheless there is still an unfinished agenda that presents an historic opportunity to work for and with children in transforming the world. Participants have the potential to make major contributions to the Global Movement for Children as change-makers with the influence to be a driving force for child rights, calling on everyone, everywhere, to do as much as possible for and with children.

□ **Fight HIV/AIDS**

The staggering facts of the HIV/AIDS epidemic: over 13 million children are orphaned by AIDS, about 600,000 infants are infected each year from their mother, and millions of young live with the stigma of AIDS but without access to adequate counseling, care or support. The impact of this deadly disease on children and families was the concern most frequently raised by the First Spouses/Ladies. Calls were made for more attention to preventing mother-to-child transmission, ensuring educational activities for young persons and caring for children orphaned or made vulnerable by AIDS.

Mrs. Janet Museveni of Uganda spoke of the successful reduction in the number of new cases of HIV/AIDS in Uganda from 31 per cent in 1992 to 6 per cent today – a rate that is still going down. “The lesson that we have learned through this experience of HIV/AIDS is that we must work with, and through, our communities, poor as they may be.” Mrs. Beverley Arthur of Barbados pointed out that leadership at the highest level and a multisectoral response can be an effective combatant. “HIV/AIDS is not just a health issue” and thus an expanded response in Barbados was undertaken that involved key line ministries, including Education, Youth Affairs, Sports, Social Transformation, Tourism, Labour and Home Affairs. Mme. Marguerite Kérékou shared the three action areas in her fight against HIV/AIDS in Benin.

Mme. Simone Ehivet Gbagbo of Côte d'Ivoire explained that a recently launched campaign to combat AIDS in her country organizes a core group in every village and school to raise awareness and educate the population. She stressed the importance of mobilizing first spouses to combat the spread of AIDS and said that steps had already been taken for them to work together in Africa. Mme. Chantal Biya of Cameroon further advised that the First Ladies of Africa, who met for the first time last year, are now driving the ‘African Synergy Initiative Against AIDS’. She extended an invitation to all of the First Spouses/Ladies to participate in the Initiative’s next meeting planned for this coming November.

□ **Educate Every Child**

Evoking the words of her husband at the World Education Forum in Senegal, Mrs. Annan brought the issue of girls' education to the Forum. "The keys to all the locks that are keeping girls out of school – from poverty to inequality to conflict – lies in basic education for all." In response, Mme. Chantal Compaoré of Burkina Faso spoke about the girls' education advocacy campaigns that were effectively used in her country, while Mme. Henriette Conté of Guinea pointed to the improvement of enrolment rates, particularly among girls, resulting from the 'Second Chance' education programme in her country.

Responding to Mme. Ogata's statement that 120 million children of primary school age remain out of school, the majority of which are girls, a number of First Spouses/Ladies shared the commitments and experiences of their countries in ensuring that all children realize their right to education. For example, Mme. Antoinette Sassou Nguesso of the Congo spoke of the 'Train for Peace and Solidarity', a project in the Congo that restores education services in regions touched by armed conflict. Sra. Virginia Gillum de Quiroga related the success of an educational reform programme in Bolivia in reducing school desertion and repetition by improving teaching quality, increasing student participation and offering bilingual education for indigenous children.

As observed by the participants of the Children's Forum, education should go beyond the academic and include lessons in understanding, human rights, peace, and active citizenship. An example of how this is being addressed was referred to by Mrs. Mairam Akaeva of Kyrgyzstan, head of the Mairam Foundation, which supports more than 1,000 schools in Kyrgyzstan in activities that aim to build tolerance and a culture of peace. Making reference to the CARICOM Health and Family Life Initiative, Mrs. Lisbeth Venetiaan of Suriname noted that "children who do not have access to basic provisions cannot participate adequately in education activities."

□ **Care for Every Child**

Several of the First Spouses/Ladies highlighted the importance of providing care and attention to children in the early years and related their countries' successes in this regard. Mrs. Ruby Moscoso Young shared her experience with the work done in Panama to ensure early attention to children 0-5 years of age through a project in early stimulation and improved nutrition. Mrs. Maria José Ritta of Portugal observed that "to fulfil childhood needs in our country we must further intervene at an early stage in a systematic way, strengthening family skills and enhancing improved family interaction." The First Lady of Ghana, Mrs. Theresa Kufuor, pointed out that "ensuring that children have a good start in life is the best investment that any country can make. The promotion of healthy development during the early years brings lasting benefits to the child." Explaining that parents need help to learn effective parenting skills, Mrs. Barbara Mogae of Botswana observed that "we do not seem to have the methods to raise children as we were raised."

□ **Stop Harming and Exploiting Children**

The First Spouses/Ladies reported on a wide range of actions that have been taken to protect children from harm and exploitation. Those whose rights have been violated include the 50-60

million children engaged in intolerable forms of labour and the one million trapped in sexual exploitation or trafficking. Sra. María Isabel Baquerizo de Noboa of Ecuador shared the experiences of the country's National Committee for the Eradication of Child Labour, and Sra. Rosa Gómez de Mejía of the Dominican Republic spoke of the prevention of child abuse and ensuring the rights of children in conflict with the law.

Various First Spouses/Ladies related experiences in the promulgation or reform of legislation and the establishment of entities to protect the rights of children. Examples include the 'Code for Children' of Central African Republic that was mentioned by Mme. Germaine Ziguèle and the Sub-Committee on Children's Rights of the Permanent Human Rights Commission of Zambia, explained by Mrs. Maureen Mwanawasa.

□ **Protect Children from War**

Over 300,000 children are involved in armed conflict worldwide. Over the past decade 2 million children have been murdered and another 6 million injured due to conflict. Mrs. Azra Belkic of Bosnia and Herzegovina stated that the children's cemeteries there vividly attest to the number of children who never returned from war. H.H. Shaikha Sabika Bint Ibrahim Al-Khalifa of Bahrain called attention to the child victims of current conflicts, as did Sra. Vilma Espín Guillois, representing Cuba. Dr. Arzu Rana Deuba of Nepal chronicled the difficulties that have arisen in the country as a result of terrorism and conflict and the struggle to effectively address issues affecting children within this context, including their prevailing sense of helplessness. She appealed to the UN to initiate special programmes for children in conflict-affected environments. Mrs. Ogata implored: "Please include the world's 7.7 million refugee children in the *Say Yes* campaign."

More than 10,000 children are killed or maimed by landmines each year. Mrs. Carolina Maduro de Villeda of Honduras spoke of a successful de-mining effort at the border area between her country and Nicaragua. Mrs. Diana Plestina spoke of Croatia's recent experiences with the horror of war and the continued terror of landmines. She related experiences in helping child victims of landmines recover from the physical and emotional trauma through a regional center for these children, and recommended the establishment of such centers in all continents.

□ **Listen to Children**

Listening to children and taking their opinion into account leads to new areas of work and commitment. Children's Parliaments were reported by many as one means to effectively give voice to the opinions of children. Mme. Elizabete Yalá of Guinea-Bissau was one of the First Spouses to report on the success of the Children's Parliament in her country. Mme Azra Belkic of Bosnia and Herzegovina proposed the establishment of national and regional structures where the public opinions of children could be heard.

□ **Invest in Children**

Children have to be at the center and heart of the world's and each country's agenda, and they deserve the investment of requisite resources. Strategies to reduce poverty must be rewritten so that investments in children are given priority. Financing of this investment, at all levels, was a reoccurring concern raised at the Forum. Appeals were made for the increased resources required to achieve goals for children.

Debt burdens were cited as a major impediment to financing services for children. The First Lady of Bolivia reported on experiences in financing social programmes with debt relief through the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. Queen Sofia of Spain advised that suitable microcredit policies can be an efficient instrument for improving the living conditions of children. She also recommended that the developed countries assume their responsibilities regarding children through ratification of all treaties concerning children, raising public awareness of the problems affecting children worldwide, and maintaining or increasing financial support to less favored countries for infant welfare, training and development programmes.

Many of the First Spouses/Ladies reported on the work of organizations or foundations for children that they were instrumental in establishing. For example, Mrs. Jolanta Kwasniewska of Poland shared information about the 'Rainbow Bridge Project', which fosters peace and international understanding among children and young people. Mme. Halimé Deby of Chad spoke of the foundation in her name that helps orphans. The 'Women's Effort to Save Orphans' in Uganda was initiated by Mrs. Janet Museveni more than fifteen years ago. Mrs. Varshnie Jagdeo of Guyana spoke of her 'Kids First Fund', and Princess Mathilde of Belgium of the foundation she started to serve vulnerable children.

□ **Women's Leadership**

Leadership is critical to build a massive constituency of people who demand action and accountability for children at every level of society. Ms. Bellamy's premise that First Spouses/Ladies are in a unique position to assume a leadership role in expanding and sustaining the Global Movement for Children was repeatedly confirmed during the Forum. Mrs. Alshikna Fadya Saad Alabdulah Alsaban, representing Kuwait, declared that "more and more dialogue is needed...[but] we should not wait 10 years to meet again." Mrs. Sarojini Jugnauth of Mauritius shared this perception, urging all to "stay mobilized for children."

Sra. Martha Sahagún de Fox of Mexico observed that as spouses of Heads of State or as women in key posts of Government, the participants could carry out actions that will benefit society. "Our responsibility is great. Our work and commitment is to give concrete answers, answers that will generate hope and tangible solutions." She advised that the XI Conference of Spouses of Heads of States and Governments would be meeting in September with a proposed theme of childhood and poverty.

Female leadership at all levels was deemed critical and amply demonstrated in the rich exchange of experiences and of human triumphs during the Forum. As stated by Mrs. Susanne Mubarak of Egypt, "without women... the goals we put for ourselves will never be met." Several of the First Spouses/Ladies called for reinvigoration of women-led organizations involved in effecting social change.

The indisputable need to address the situation of women was repeatedly underscored in the Forum. In the words of Mr. Pentti Arajävi of Finland, “the link between the rights of the child and women’s rights should be given a central place in our efforts.” Sra. Marisabel Rodríguez de Chávez of Venezuela spoke of the need to improve the situation of women, if goals for children were to be reached. “It is not possible to change the world for children unless we change the world for women.” In the words of H.H. Shaikha Sabika Bint Ibrahim Al-Khalifa, “our aspirations go beyond what has been achieved so far.”

Dr. Sadik concluded the meeting with the observation that “if we can ensure that all children, including each girl, are guaranteed access to education and health, and protection from exploitation, abuse and war, we will be able to engender leadership in tomorrow’s women, thereby guaranteeing the well being of children and the transformation of the world.”