



Statement at the 3rd Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

10 May 2004

Empowerment of Indigenous Girls and Women: a key to achievement of the Millennium Development Goals

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Members of the Permanent Forum, Delegates, Colleagues, Indigenous brothers and sisters,

I feel honored today to address, on behalf of UNICEF, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. This Forum is of the utmost importance to all of us. As do similar regional, national and local bodies and social movements, it gives voice to the demands of indigenous peoples around the world. We are challenged not only to listen and engage in dialogue -- but to take action together to build a better and more just world. We are witnessing in many countries what happens when this listening, this dialogue between cultures and ethnic groups, does not take place, when change is promised but never occurs: indigenous communities take matters into their own hands -- through the democratic process where it works, but increasingly by going into the streets and forcing change when they see no alternatives.

Peaceful, democratic alternatives **must be** constructed -- and what better place to start than with children? In his statement on indigenous peoples in Machu Picchu, Peru, last November, the Secretary-General expressed particular concern about the discrimination and marginalization of children. "This can no longer be tolerated," he said. And yet despite positive action on some fronts, it *continues to be widely tolerated or simply ignored*; in some countries, even amidst overall economic growth, matters are getting worse instead of better for indigenous communities, and the children growing up in them.

Indigenous people endure far higher rates of poverty than do non-indigenous people, and indigenous children, particularly girls, are the worst affected. Chronic malnutrition leading to stunting and increased vulnerability to disease, high levels of maternal mortality among indigenous women, caused by inadequate pre-natal care and nourishment for mothers (many of them adolescents) are among the reasons why indigenous girls and boys are disproportionately represented among the world's 11 million children who die every year -- 30,000 each day -- before reaching the age of five. What the proportion is, exactly, we do not know -- the statistics are not disaggregated to identify indigenous people. Low rates of birth registration compound this official "invisibility". Lack of access to culturally-appropriate, quality education ensures the inter-generational transmission of poverty and marginalization, while putting indigenous children at particular risk of becoming involved in the worst forms of child labor or falling victim to commercial sexual exploitation and violence. Here, too, the lack of disaggregated data hampers us, but what evidence we have clearly points to girls and women as bearing the brunt of this intolerable pattern of deprivation and denial of human rights.

In its programmes and advocacy for the rights of indigenous girls and women -- the focus of this panel -- UNICEF is guided by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and ILO Convention 169. UNICEF believes that indigenous women and girls should be empowered to claim their rights and be key actors in processes of change within their community and nation. In Latin America and the Caribbean, where I am working, and in other regions where UNICEF has activities, we are particularly concerned about the violence and exploitation affecting indigenous girls and are making this area one of our top priorities, along with health and education. Gender-based violence, abuse, and exploitation are of serious concern to UNICEF. In Brazil, UNICEF has studied the situation of afro-descendant and indigenous domestic working girls, while in Venezuela UNICEF supported the launch of a campaign, including a phone line and the training of counselors, aimed at addressing violence against women. In the area of health, UNICEF's action has focused on reducing maternal mortality through the training of traditional birth attendants in Argentina, El Salvador, Malaysia and Peru and on training mothers for the care of young children. The promotion of education is also essential as girls are often discriminated against in this area, resulting in high illiteracy rates among indigenous women. In addition to supporting many bilingual education programmes, UNICEF is supporting female literacy in Bolivia and in the Philippines for instance.

Recent, very troubling reports show that progress is lagging toward achievement of most of the Millennium Development goals set by the international community. As our Executive Director Carol Bellamy said last fall at the launch of a UNICEF report on indigenous children's rights: "If we are to achieve goals such as poverty reduction, education for all and an end to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, we must put all children -- especially the most vulnerable children such as those in indigenous communities -- at the centre of our efforts." We are therefore encouraged by the increased attention being paid to indigenous issues and, in particular, by the recent decision by the UN Development Group to ensure that they form an essential part of the co-operation of UN agencies in developing countries. This, of course, will require that we do many things differently, including making specific efforts to collect and disaggregate data on the situation of indigenous peoples. Governments must work more closely with indigenous leaders -- including women -- to find solutions to the crisis faced by so many indigenous communities.

UNICEF believes that successful and sustainable initiatives for indigenous children will require special emphasis on empowering girls and women, and must be founded upon a human rights approach that is, by definition, intercultural and incorporates indigenous worldviews. In other words, the most effective initiatives help to develop community autonomy and empowerment, promote local indigenous languages and customs, respect traditional social structures and recognize the important role of indigenous leaders in defending and promoting the rights of their communities' children. In this way, an intercultural approach enhances and reinforces human rights by taking into account how different peoples around the world strive to achieve the same goal: to live in freedom, peace and security, and to enjoy equity, mutual respect and understanding. We have much to learn from our indigenous sisters and brothers about how to live, not only in harmony with nature, but also with one another.

Thank you.