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QUESTION OF A CONVENTION ON THE
RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Written statement submitted by the Women's International
Democratic Federation, a non-governmental organization
in consultative status (category I)

The Secretary-General has received the following communication, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[13 February 1980]

The Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) warmly welcomes the decision of the Commission on Human Rights to continue at its thirty-sixth session its work on a draft convention on the rights of the child with a view to completing the elaboration of the convention at that session.

Since it was founded more than thirty years ago, WIDF has, as a women's organization, upheld the view that realization of the rights of women is closely bound up with that of the rights of children.

Accordingly, WIDF has from the outset engaged in wide-ranging activities on behalf of children and considers that the status of children is a crucial social problem in the world of today that calls for an immediate solution in many countries.

In its work to improve the situation of children in the world, WIDF is always guided by the fundamental principles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, as reflected in documents such as the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and other documents.

WIDF notes with satisfaction that, further to the intensive efforts by the progressive forces in the world, the United Nations and its specialized agencies have adopted a number of documents aimed at safeguarding the rights and interests of children; WIDF draws attention, in particular, to the value of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations in 1959.

At the same time, WIDF expresses its concern that, twenty years after the unanimous adoption of the Declaration by 78 Governments represented in the United Nations at that time, we now note that some of those Governments violate the principles of the Declaration. Hence it is essential that the rights of the child should not only be proclaimed but should also be recognized and effectively implemented. In this respect, the duties towards children should be strengthened by conferring on the Declaration the status of an international law in the form of a convention which would be an important step towards full implementation of the rights of the child.

WIDF is gratified that the draft of the convention is submitted to the Commission on Human Rights for discussion and endorses the spirit of the document. WIDF, which has strenuously promoted the elaboration of the convention on the rights of the child and has had the honour to express its views on this matter at various meetings of the international community, in particular at the thirty-third, thirty-fourth and thirty-fifth sessions of the Commission on Human Rights, welcomes the fact that the present draft of the convention incorporates ideas that we have expressed earlier, such as those concerning the problem of the protection of women and children living in extremely disadvantaged circumstances and the protection of children of migrant workers and of children of refugees.

WIDF, which strives for recognition of motherhood as a social function, especially welcomes and endorses the fact that the draft of the convention pays attention to the protection of mothers (art. 13, para. (d)) and deals with the need to establish an infrastructure of pre-school institutions in keeping with the interests of working mothers (art. 8, para. 3).

At the same time, because it is deeply concerned about various burning questions concerning the situation of children in the world and deeply interested in solving them, WIDF ventures to draw certain matters to the attention of the participants at the present session.

With a view to achieving a better understanding of the situation and the needs of children in the world of today, drawing the attention of the international community to these problems and encouraging it to act on behalf of children, WIDF has held a number of meetings at the regional and international level, actively participated in the World Conference "For a Peaceful and Happy Future for All Children" which was held at Moscow from 7 to 11 September 1979 and brought together representatives of the United Nations system as well as many national and international organizations of different political and religious convictions, and it firmly endorses the appeal made by the Moscow World Conference to the thirty-fourth session of the United Nations General Assembly, to the Governments and the Parliaments of all countries of the world, an appeal which calls on them, inter alia, to increase their efforts in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations to save future generations from the scourge of war, to ensure peace and security, to take steps and use their efforts against all forms of aggression, to do all in their power to consolidate and render irreversible international détente, to halt the arms race and to achieve general and complete disarmament, thus ensuring a peaceful and secure future for children.

We are deeply convinced that only in a world of peace can children enjoy the rights which are enunciated in the United Nations Declaration and set forth in the draft of the convention, particularly their right to life, the first and foremost of human rights, and their right to health, well-being and harmonious physical and mental development.

Children are always the first casualties of war. The tragic lesson of the Second World War, which took the lives of 13 million children, must not be forgotten.

Since 1945, more than 100 armed conflicts have occurred in various parts of the world and again brought atrocious suffering for children. Every year the arms race swallows up more than \$400 billion, when 12 million children are dying from hunger each year and 100 million children have no opportunity to study or to learn to read and write. Yet \$400 million would be enough to feed all the children who are under-nourished. By putting a brake on the arms race and reducing military budgets, it would be possible to improve medical assistance, the conditions of education for children, etc.

The situation of children is particularly tragic in countries where racial discrimination and apartheid have become the policy of the State. In the Transkei, the first Bantustan for the blacks, in South Africa, 216 out of every 1,000 children die. Apartheid is a violation of every one of the principles of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. In countries with military régimes, such as Chile, the fate of children is dramatic in the extreme. The parents of 60,000 Chilean children have been killed, have disappeared without trace or are locked up in the Military Junta's prison cells. Human rights are being violated and it is impossible to ensure the rights of the child.

Reference must be made to the large-scale exploitation of children and adolescents. In Asia, Africa and Latin America, hundreds of thousands of children used as cheap labour help directly or indirectly to swell the profits of the multinational corporations. According to estimates by the ILO, in 1979, the International Year of the Child, approximately 52 million children gave their labour for appallingly low wages, without the right to any social insurance.

WIDF, which covers 129 organizations from 114 countries in the world and has well documented files on the situation of children on different continents, is concerned about the situation of many children in the countries of Western Europe and North America who are deprived of the right to education and protection of their health and are compelled to work in order to support families that are victims of unemployment.

Millions of children in many developing countries are condemned to disease, hunger and poverty as a result of the policy of neo-colonialism and an unjust economic order.

Accordingly, the international community must make a more forceful contribution to the re-organization of international economic relations on the basis of genuinely democratic principles and the introduction of a New International Economic Order, based on the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States adopted by the United Nations in 1975, something which would unquestionably open up new opportunities to improve the situation of children in the world.

The countries which have thrown off the yoke of colonialism and have embarked on independent development pay increasing attention to programmes designed to improve the situation of children and young people, who are an integral part of their development.

In the socialist countries, where Governments assume the responsibility of creating optimum conditions to ensure the harmonious development of children through comprehensive mother and child medical services which are free of charge, a network of pre-school educational establishments and free general education and occupational training, children enjoy all of their rights and have a secure and happy life.

On the basis of the foregoing, sharing the concern of the international community, encouraging it to take appropriate measures to improve the situation of children in the world,

Highly appreciative of the efforts of the Commission on Human Rights to elaborate the convention on the rights of the child and,

Guided by the desire to contribute effectively thereto,

WIDF ventures to make the following proposals:

1. Bearing in mind that children are the first casualties of war, WIDF proposes that the text of the convention on the rights of the child should, as one of its major points, include a commitment by States to spare no efforts to safeguard peace, since the latter is the prerequisite for guaranteeing all the rights of children and the happiness of mankind;
2. WIDF also proposes that the draft of the convention should retain a special article appearing in the previous draft submitted by Austria, Bulgaria, Colombia, Jordan, Poland, Senegal and the Syrian Arab Republic at the thirty-fourth session of the Commission on Human Rights, reading: "The child shall be protected from practices which may foster racial, religious or any other form of discrimination. He shall be brought up in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, friendship among peoples, peace and universal brotherhood, and in full consciousness that his energy and talents should be devoted to the service of his fellow men";
3. In view of the fact that realization of the rights of children is closely bound up with the social and economic progress of countries, WIDF proposes lastly that the draft of the convention should mention the commitment by States to promote the introduction of a New International Economic Order.

As a non-governmental organization, WIDF will, for its part, do everything in its power to mobilize public opinion to induce Governments to ratify the convention which would be a decisive step towards realization of the rights of the child.

At the same time, WIDF reaffirms its conviction that this instrument will become a reality if its principles are rooted in national laws and if Governments undertake to put them into practice.