

**Launch of the WHO report
"Women and health: today's evidence tomorrow's agenda"
9 November 2009, Geneva, Switzerland**

**Statement by the Permanent Representative of Denmark,
Ambassador Marie-Louise Overvad**

Director-General, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to take part today in the launch of the WHO report on Women and Health. This is a topic which is a high priority for my government.

Women's health matters, not only to women themselves, but to their children, to their families and to communities and societies at large. The important contributions of women to all aspects of society – in today's context, I should in particular mention health care both in formal positions and informally and women's importance for successful development – and this in both their productive and reproductive roles – must be recognized.

The report takes a new approach to the issue of Women and Health. It reviews a broad range of available data and evidence pertaining to the productive and reproductive roles of girls and women throughout their life course. By covering the full lifespan of women, the report has succeeded in demonstrating in a particularly convincing way the necessity of urgently reinforcing action to ensure real improvements in the health and lives of girls and women in all parts of the world.

It is now widely recognized that health issues have implications which extend far beyond the health sector. We need to study social and political and economic and ecological determinants for health. We need to look both at systems and governance to make progress on health equity. And we need a close dialogue with many different stakeholders in developing countries, in governments broadly, in the multilateral organizations and with civil society.

Gender equality and empowerment of women in a broad sense continue to be a top priority in Denmark's development cooperation. Last year the Danish Minister for Development initiated a campaign which focused on the inequalities between men and women. The campaign was linked to the Millennium Development Goal on gender equality, MDG 3. The campaign involved engagement by a large number of international leaders, who gave impressive responses with commitments to deliver concrete actions that will help accelerate progress on gender equality.

And I am very pleased to mention that Dr Chan was among these leaders, who promised to do something extra to promote gender equality. Your contribution to the campaign, Dr. Chan, is much appreciated, and I see this report on Women and Health as part of the implementation of your overall commitment to "do something extra".

When the world's leaders adopted the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, health issues were at the centre of their attention. Three of the eight goals relate directly to health: MDG4 on reducing infant mortality, MDG5 on improving maternal health and MDG6 on combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other infectious diseases.

Recent reviews of all the MDGs indicate that MDG5 on maternal health shows the least progress, as is also amply substantiated in the present report on Women and Health. Despite the increased number of players and resources available, we have yet to see tangible results in terms of health for all. Although some health indicators have improved among certain groups, we witness an increasing gap in health outcomes, especially amongst women. Maternal health is simply not progressing in many developing countries. This is clearly an issue we need to address.

In my mind, the enormous differences in maternal mortality represent the most striking health disparity in the twenty-first century. And it tells us that even though we generally recognize the economic benefits of a healthy population, we still have far to go. The cost, for instance, of providing safe abortion is 1/10 of the cost of treating complications related to unsafe abortion. Therefore, we have to find new ways of portraying health expenditures. We have to present them as more than costs; rather as sound economic investments that will save money and improve the productive assets of societies. Failing to do so means wasting a crucial opportunity.

Also when it comes to meeting the special needs of women, the strengthening of health systems is clearly essential. It requires a functioning health system at the local level to ensure that simple complications during pregnancy and childbirth do not develop into serious complications. Financial barriers like requiring payment for emergency care and skilled delivery services must be removed. Even small fees have proven to be a hindrance for women's access to services. Other ways of financing this expenditure must be found.

We need to lift the issue of women and health to the top of the international as well as the national agendas. This report provides a very helpful instrument in that respect. It delivers an important basis and inspiration for action. It is remarkably short and easy to read, with easy understandable schematic overviews. Please do read it! Make its contents known to decision-makers. Let's join forces and take the decisive steps forwards to make true progress in the health and lives of all girls and women around the world. We owe it not only to women themselves, but to their children, to their families and to communities and societies at large. We carry a very heavy responsibility to promote this agenda in deeds and in inspiration.

Thank you for your attention.