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DIRECTOR'S

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LETTER

WOMEN, HEALTH, AND DEVELOPMENT

As we have become increasingly aware of the discrimination faced by women in our societies, we have also come to acknowledge the importance of full participation by women in the development process, particularly in the health field. Since the problem of discrimination is rooted in factors that are fundamentally social and cultural—and thus intertwined with the overall development process—the participation of women in health, both as active beneficiaries of health care and agents and promoters of health services, must be seen in this larger context.

In addition, we should be mindful that women in rural and poor urban areas of developing countries experience a double inequity: not only must they deal with specific discrimination as women, which traditionally is more pronounced among these populations, but also with the general injustice of poverty. Therefore, in our efforts to identify the health needs of women, we must give priority to the needs of these marginal groups and establish appropriate mechanisms for meeting those needs; we must also encourage and take advantage of the great potential of women as promoters of health.

The Governing Bodies of PAHO have recognized these problems on many occasions in their resolutions and have made recommendations to the Member Governments regarding means to alleviate them. Accordingly, the Organization has established the Program on Women, Health, and Development to coordinate, promote, and support these initiatives, and has made a firm commitment to apply the recommendations of the Governing Bodies through concerted action in all programs of cooperation with the countries. At the same time, it has resolved to provide a good example by adopting measures to increase the participation of women in the Bureau.

Although substantive improvement in the status of women can only be achieved through profound societal and institutional changes, we in the health sector can lead the way, given the will to do so and a clear understanding of the problem. □



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