

Outlook on Lifestyle

Group tries to ease struggle

by Gil Hardy
Thomson News Service

The work day begins at 4 a.m. for a typical woman in a developing country in Africa.

She may walk 20 kilometres to collect water that is often contaminated and returns home with a 20-kilogram load. Then she prepares breakfast for her family by laboriously pounding corn or millet.

After working in the field all day, she collects firewood for the evening meal. It is prepared using the same strenuous method that began her day.

It is this exhausting, time-consuming struggle to survive that Sharon Capeling hopes to ease as head of a small United Nations agency on "the cutting edge" of development aid for women. Capeling, a native of Moose Jaw, Sask., is the first Canadian to head the UN's Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

"We can't hope to have the kind of development we're seeking without involving women more actively," she said in an interview.

"It's UNIFEM's job to keep abreast of some of the best thinking and fresh ideas with respect to

how to work with women. This has been a problem. There's been a lot of rhetoric and a lot of policy change but often that does not get translated to actual programming in the field."

UNIFEM, based in New York, is a stark reminder of the triumph of words over action. Its budget is only \$8.5 million compared to about \$2 billion for the United Nations Development Program alone.

Canada is the second largest donor, behind Norway, at \$1.15 million and the United States "is well down the list." Capeling, who has worked in international development for more than 20 years, does not mince words.

NOT GENEROUS
"This is pathetically small and certainly the resources have not matched the rhetoric. You can't pick up a document in development that doesn't talk about women and yet when it comes to putting money into the hands of women, the contributions by the donor governments have not been very generous."

Development agencies are gradually accepting the idea that involving women is crucial to their success. Women do two-thirds of the work in the world.

In the Third World, more than 60 per cent of the farming is done by women. One of every three households depends on a woman for its livelihood.

UNIFEM, established in 1976 as part of the UN's Decade for Women, was made a permanent agency in 1984. One aspect of its role is to "funnel new ideas and practical experience into the policy discussions" of development agencies.

More importantly, it serves as a field laboratory or research and development arm of the UN. It runs innovative pilot projects, documenting the results and demonstrating how successes can be transferred to other Third World countries.

"After that, UNIFEM should back away and sell these approaches to some of the bigger agencies with large funds," Capeling said.

In Kenya, UNIFEM took a different approach to providing safe water for villages. In the past, a waterhole would be bored and a pump installed with little community involvement.

"The litany of broken water-pumps and dried out waterholes across Africa made people rethink how to do this," she said.

UNIFEM arranged to train local women to maintain the pumps and make small repairs. A backup fund, supported by a small agricultural project, was established to buy parts or pay for major repairs.

"If you involve the women, you have a much greater chance of success. They are the ones with the vested interest in the pump working because they are the ones carrying the 20 kilos of water on their heads, not the men," said Capeling.

This kind of project also meets what Capeling calls women's "strategic needs." It helps them break away from narrow, traditional roles and improves their community status.

"It's very important to improve the socio-economic status of women. So many things are tied to it."

"Literate women are more responsive to health education programs. Women who have more economic and social status tend to be more concerned about spacing their children."

Capeling's appointment, which took effect Feb. 1, was in part due to the fact that she is Canadian.

HIGHLY REGARDED

"Canada has a highly regarded reputation with respect to the leadership taken on women's issues, particularly in development," she said.

Her work in development began with CUSO in 1967. She taught for three years in Barbados then wanted "something more exotic."

She found it in Tanzania where she worked until 1972. She spent eight years with CUSO's headquarters in Ottawa before returning to Africa as a regional director.

Capeling, 44, was visiting her ailing mother in Moose Jaw last year when the call came from New York inviting her to apply for the post as UNIFEM's director. It was a fitting locale because it was in Moose Jaw that her interest in international affairs began.

Her father, a British-born battery repairer, used to tell her stories about the kings and queens of England.

"I was enchanted and I'm sure that's where my early interest in history came from."

She went on to major in history

at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon and even taught the subject for a year in a Saskatoon high school. But history also means knowing current events and Capeling was caught up in the world of rebellion in the Congo and the UN's role.

She was also part of the Sixties Generation and was involved in student politics in high school and university. That "concern for others besides ourselves" caused her to join CUSO.

"It was a naive feeling that if some of us just went out and did our best, worked hard, that we would help to develop the world. That was a false premise, although well intentioned, that we could develop someone else."

Capeling describes herself as "very pragmatic" today, a quality that will help her to help Third World women and their communities. She expects some UNIFEM projects will fail during her tenure.

"If we don't have any failures, then we're not leading. We're not far enough at the edge."

SAME DAY TAX RETURNS

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Garbage truck catches fire

Halton Hills Fire officials report a garbage blaze that began in the back of a garbage truck Friday shortly before 1 p.m. Officials put out the flaming garbage, which was dumped into the parking lot at Gordon Alcott Arena by the truck's driver, when he saw the contents ablaze. The cause of the fire is unknown. Officials report no damage and no injury.

Fire officials showed up at the scene of a demolished police cruiser shortly before 11 p.m. Saturday night. The propane tank on the cruiser was leaking. Officials on the scene pinched the hoses to prevent an explosion. The police cruiser had been struck at Mountainview Road near Armstrong Avenue by another car after an officer had pulled over another vehicle for a traffic offence. There were no injuries in the collision.

Halton Hills had its first grass fire of the season Sunday morning. Officials say they were called to put out the yard blaze behind a Maple Avenue home at 11 a.m. The cause of the fire is said to be ashes from a fireplace that were dumped on a hill in back of the property. There was no damage and there were no injuries.

The second grass fire of the season occurred Monday afternoon on Carruthers Road in Georgetown. The 4 p.m. fire, which crept along the railway tracks, could have been caused by a passing train, officials say.

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