

5 March 2010  
UNIC/PRESS RELEASE/13-2010

FROM THE UN SECRETARY-GENERAL

## INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

"Equal rights, equal opportunities: progress for all"

8 March 2010

### Message of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

Gender equality and women's empowerment are fundamental to the global mission of the United Nations to achieve equal rights and dignity for all. This is a matter of basic human rights, as enshrined in our founding Charter and the Universal Declaration. It is part of the Organization's very identity.

But equality for women and girls is also an economic and social imperative. Until women and girls are liberated from poverty and injustice, all our goals -- peace, security, sustainable development -- stand in jeopardy.

Fifteen years ago at the Fourth World Conference on Women, Governments pledged to advance equality, development and peace for all women everywhere. The landmark Beijing Declaration has had a deep and wide-ranging impact. It has guided policymaking and inspired new national laws. It has sent a clear message to women and girls around the world that equality and opportunity are their inalienable rights.

There are many examples of progress, thanks in large part to the resolute efforts of civil society organizations. Most girls now receive an education, particularly at primary level, and more women are now more likely to run businesses or participate in government. A growing number of countries have legislation that supports sexual and reproductive health and promotes gender equality.

Nonetheless, much work remains. Maternal mortality remains unacceptably high, too few women have access to family planning, and violence against women remains a cause for global shame. In particular, sexual violence during conflict is endemic. The Security Council last year adopted two strong resolutions on this issue and I have just appointed a Special Representative to mobilize the international community to address these crimes. My "UNiTE to End Violence against Women" campaign and the recently launched Network of Men Leaders are striving to expand our global advocacy efforts.

One key lesson of the past decade and a half is the importance of addressing broader discrimination and injustice. Gender stereotyping and discrimination remain common in all cultures and communities. Early and forced marriage, so-called "honour killing", sexual abuse and trafficking of young women and girls are disturbingly prevalent and, in some areas, on the rise. Whether looking through the lens of poverty, or in times of disaster, we see that women still bear the greatest burden.

Another lesson is that the United Nations must lead by example. Emphasizing that women are central to peace and security, we are working to deploy more women military and police officers in our peacekeeping operations. We have more women in senior United Nations posts than at any time in history, and we hope

soon to have a dynamic composite entity within the United Nations system to provide more coherent programming and a stronger voice for gender equality and women's empowerment. I urge the General Assembly to create this new entity without delay.

The Beijing Declaration remains as relevant today as when it was adopted. The third Millennium Development Goal -- to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment -- is central to all the rest. When women are denied the opportunity to better themselves and their societies, we all lose. On this International Women's Day, let us look critically at the achievements of the past 15 years so we can build on what has worked and correct what has not. Let us work with renewed determination for a future of equal rights, equal opportunities and progress for all.

\*\*\*