

UNITED NATIONS



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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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MESSAGE ON INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

8 March 2011

One hundred years ago, when the world first commemorated International Women's Day, gender equality and women's empowerment were largely radical ideas. On this centenary, we celebrate the significant progress that has been achieved through determined advocacy, practical action and enlightened policy making. Yet, in too many countries and societies, women remain second-class citizens.

Although the gender gap in education is closing, there are wide differences within and across countries, and far too many girls are still denied schooling, leave prematurely or complete school with few skills and fewer opportunities. Women and girls also continue to endure unacceptable discrimination and violence, often at the hand of intimate partners or relatives. In the home and at school, in the workplace and in the community, being female too often means being vulnerable. And in many conflict zones, sexual violence is deliberately and systematically used to intimidate women and whole communities.

My UNiTE to End Violence Against Women campaign, along with its Network of Men Leaders, is working to end impunity and change mindsets. There is also growing international resolve to punish and prevent sexual aggression in conflict, and to do more to implement the Security Council's landmark resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, which highlights the importance of involving women in all aspects of building and keeping peace.

Another area where we urgently need to see significant progress is on women's and children's health. The September 2010 Summit on the Millennium Development Goals recognized the central importance of this issue, and Member States and the philanthropic community have pledged strong support for my global strategy to save lives and improve the health of women and children over the next four years.

In the realm of decision-making, more women, in more countries, are taking their rightful seat in parliament. Yet fewer than 10 per cent of countries have female heads of state or government. Even where women are prominent in politics, they are often severely under-represented in other areas of decision-making, including at the highest levels of business and industry. A recent UN initiative – the Women's Empowerment Principles, now embraced by more than 130 major corporations – aims to redress this imbalance.

This year's observance of International Women's Day focuses on equal access to education, training and science and technology. Cell phones and the Internet, for example, can enable women to improve the health and well-being of their families, take advantage of income-earning opportunities, and protect themselves from exploitation and vulnerability. Access to such tools, backed up by education and training, can help women to break the cycle of poverty, combat injustice and exercise their rights.

The launch this year of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women – UN Women – demonstrates our intent to deepen our pursuit of this agenda. Only through women's full and equal participation in all areas of public and private life can we hope to achieve the sustainable, peaceful and just society promised in the United Nations Charter.