

Secretary-General's remarks at International Women's Day event: "Empower Rural Women - End Hunger and Poverty"

New York, 7 March 2012

I am pleased to be with you again for International Women's Day. What an impressive gathering. I am very much encouraged and impressed by such a huge gathering of world women leaders.

Empowering women and girls has been a priority from my first day as Secretary-General.

It is an important objective in its own right.

And it is essential to attaining our many shared objectives.

That is why my focus is always on gender equality and women's empowerment.

Let me take you behind closed doors.

Wherever I travel, I make sure that my staff brief me on the status of women in any given country -- girls in school, maternal mortality rates, representation in parliament and at cabinet level.

I carefully study these numbers. And then, I tell the leaders and others with whom I meet how strongly I feel and how the United Nations stands ready to help improve the situation.

That is because few countries are really where they should be in this regard. Even in the places that perform well, there is room for improvement.

Sometimes, during these talks, I can feel the men around the table squirming and looking for an opportunity to change the subject.

Perhaps I sound to them like a broken record.

But what is really broken are the places where women are not fairly and equally represented.

Even the women, sometimes, try to help to justify why there aren't more of their sisters in decision-making roles.

That is why I say we have to change not only men's mindsets – but women's, too.

Nowhere, and at no time, can we allow women to be treated or accepted as second-class citizens.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Such thinking is gaining ground worldwide.

There are more women Heads of State and Government than ever, and the highest proportion of women

serving as Government ministers. I am counting the number of women Ambassadors in the UN all the time, and I am happy to see that this number has increased sharply after I assumed my post as Secretary-General. And I am also counting the numbers of women Foreign Ministers and Heads of State and Government.

Women are exercising ever greater influence in business.

More girls are going to school, and are growing up healthier and better equipped to realize their potential.

But, despite this momentum, there is a long way to go before women and girls can be said to enjoy the fundamental rights, freedom and dignity that are their birthright and that will guarantee their well-being.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the world's rural areas.

That is why I am glad that this year's International Women's Day is devoted to rural women and girls.

They make up one quarter of the global population.

Yet they routinely figure at the bottom of every economic, social and political indicator, from income, education and health to participation in decision-making.

They perform most of the unpaid care work in rural areas.

And they are a major part of the agricultural labour force.

Rural women number almost half a billion smallholder farmers and landless workers.

If they had equal access to productive resources, agricultural yields would rise, relieving as many as 150 million people from hunger.

The discriminatory laws and practices that hold back rural women affect entire communities and nations.

Countries where women lack land ownership rights or access to credit have significantly more malnourished children.

By empowering rural women we could end the hidden development tragedy of stunting, which affects almost 200 million children worldwide.

Investing in rural women is a smart investment in a nation's development.

Yet, despite the obvious benefits, women farmers receive only 5 per cent of agricultural extension services.

This makes no sense.

On this International Women's Day, let us commit to ending discrimination and empowering the world's rural women.

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

The plight of the world's rural women and girls mirrors that of women and girls throughout society.

The glass ceiling persists in the workplace.

Violence is pervasive at home and in conflict.

In too many countries, sons are still the priority, and daughters are kept from school.

And hundreds of thousands of women die each year in the act of giving life for want of basic obstetric care.

Even those countries with the best records still maintain disparity in what women and men are paid for the same work, and see continuing under-representation of women in political and business decision-making.

Even here, at the United Nations, we cannot escape the spotlight. We are not free from blame.

But I am determined to change our record.

I am especially proud of the establishment of UN Women under the leadership of Michelle Bachelet.

I am working to make sure that the UN itself walks the talk.

Today we have more women in senior positions than ever before.

Our top humanitarian official and our top development official...

Our head of management and chief internal oversight official...

Our top doctor, top lawyer and even our top cop... they are all women.

We have more female Special Representatives than ever before.

And just this past Friday, I appointed Susanna Malcorra, currently our Under-Secretary-General for Field Support, [who] will join my immediate office as Chef de Cabinet/Chief of Staff.

I plan to do even more in this direction in my second term. In particular, my challenge now is to see the same kind of representation of women throughout middle management.

Across the UN system, we are doing more than ever before for gender equality and women's empowerment.

From getting girls into school ... to bringing men and boys together as partners against violence against women.

From promoting a global strategy for women's health ... to supporting women's participation in politics and their access to decent work.

The UN system is working for women and girls.

So, on this International Women's Day, I urge Governments, civil society and the private sector to commit to gender equality and the empowerment of women – as a fundamental human right and a force for the benefit of all.

The energy, talent and strength of women and girls represent humankind's most valuable untapped natural resource.

I wish you a productive meeting.

Thank you very much.