

International Women's Day, 8 March 2005
Celebrating Our Gains, Accelerating Change

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International Women's Day 2005 marks a crossroads for women. In the decade since Beijing, the signs of progress are many. There is growing recognition that gender equality is a prerequisite for eradicating poverty and promoting sustainable development, as stated in the Millennium Declaration. The spread of HIV/AIDS has been recognized as a gender issue, as well as a health issue, and the impact of war on women and women's role in peace-building is recognized and validated by Security Council resolution 1325. Women's human rights — monitored and upheld by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), now ratified by 179 countries — are now on every major agenda, national, regional and international.

Legislation is being drafted to strengthen women's economic security in such vital areas as land, property and inheritance rights, decent employment, and access to credit and markets. At least 45 countries today have laws against domestic violence, while over 20 more are drafting new legislation or amending criminal assault laws to include domestic violence. Governments are beginning to adopt gender-sensitive laws and policies on HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment and care. And quotas or other affirmative measures have been adopted to increase women's representation in political decision-making in countries in all regions, including many countries emerging from conflict, which are striving to build peaceful and more democratic societies.

At the heart of all these gains are women's rights and gender equality advocates. On International Women's Day, we honour these women, who tirelessly advocate, organize and mobilize to keep gender equality on the table.

And yet, while we celebrate progress, we know that it has been too slow. Thirty years after the beginning of the Decade on Women, and ten years after Beijing, it is still a woman's face we see when we speak of poverty, of HIV/AIDS, of violent conflict and social upheaval, of trafficking in human beings. Violence against women, already horrific in times of peace, intensifies during armed conflict with sexual violence now routinely used as a weapon of war. And women are everywhere disproportionately concentrated in poorly paid, unsafe and insecure jobs, struggling to lift themselves and their families out of poverty.

To break the cycles of poverty, violence and gender discrimination, we need to accelerate progress, and expand its reach. What will it take?

Above all, it takes determined implementation and greater accountability. In the area of violence against women, to take one example, we have learned how to make this happen. Since its establishment in 1997, the UNIFEM Trust Fund to Eliminate Violence Against Women has brought UN agencies and women's networks together to support 175 initiatives in 96 countries. The Trust Fund is now focusing specifically on securing implementation of the vast array of laws and policies instituted to address the multiple forms of violence that women face. Trust Fund strategies work because they address multiple levels and multiple sectors simultaneously, transforming power relationships and strengthening women's organizing to address the social and economic causes of gender violence; they focus on community ownership and they include men as partners. Each year the Trust Fund receives far more requests than it can meet: last year again, the Fund received more than \$15 million in project requests.

However, it currently has only \$1 million to give each year. This work must be supported and fully resourced.

In addition, mainstream institutions must be transformed to make gender concerns integral parts of their policies, programmes and practices. Too often gender is included in the programme prologue or policy statement and ignored in mechanisms of implementation or monitoring of results. Women have recognized that if you want to see how governments are implementing their commitments to women, follow the money and make the money work. UNIFEM is working in over 30 countries to support national and local initiatives to include gender perspectives in budgeting processes, and to collect and use sex-disaggregated data in public policy formulation. Our programmes show that change can happen — but it takes money as well as commitment.

Finally, strengthening the institutional architecture of gender equality within the multilateral system means investing in a stronger institutional advocate for gender. It is not just a matter of placing gender experts within these institutions. Increasing gender expertise or other technical measures cannot in themselves replace a lack of political will or authority to close the implementation gap. We know what works -- but without a strong gender advocate with sufficient status, authority and resources, this knowledge and expertise will not be used. This is a waste that we cannot afford.

Women cannot wait another 30 years. In September, the world's governments will meet to review progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, adopted at the Millennium Summit in 2000. The Millennium Declaration makes clear that gender equality is important not only as a goal in itself, but for achieving all the other goals. If we are to find sustainable solutions to the challenges identified in the Declaration, including both human development and human security, the world's women — one half of its population — must be empowered to contribute their knowledge and insights to the process.

It has taken 30 years to get this far. We must now urgently move forward on implementation, accountability and adequate resources to bring about a world in which people live lives that are free of want and free of fear. We owe this to the next generation.