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From council chambers of New York to battle front of Darfur, UN marks Women's Day



Special Representative Margot Wallström speaking to residents of Walikale in the DRC in October 2010

8 March 2011 – From its plush New York Headquarters to the “rape capital of the world” in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), from the battle front in Darfur to the post-conflict stability of Liberia, the United Nations today marked International Women’s Day with a clarion call to end gender discrimination and violence once and for all.

“Today... we rededicate ourselves to campaigning against the violence and abuse which millions of women still face daily,” Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Valerie Amos said in a statement shortly before her arrival in DRC, dubbed “the rape capital of the world” by the UN envoy for sexual violence in conflict, Margot Wallström.

“The persistence of sexual violence in DRC shames us all, a disturbing and horrifying reality for thousands of children, women and men,” Ms. Amos added, stressing the need to provide girls and women with the education and information needed to ensure they have the confidence to stand up for themselves, to challenge and to be a central part of shaping their own futures.

Ms. Wallström herself said that the war in the DRC, where conflict still rages in the eastern area of the vast country, is being “waged on the bodies of women and girls.” In an opinion piece terming the DRC “ground zero in the fight against sexual violence in conflict,” she called for an end to the culture of impunity and the illegal trade in smuggled minerals which funds the fighting and sustains the sexual violence and other mass atrocities.

The Day was not only marked by horror stories from the war front but by appeals to shatter the glass ceilings that prevent women's progress on all fronts including business. In New York, a forum on investing in women and entrepreneurship launched the Financial Independence Through Entrepreneurship (FITE) initiative to help women in the developing world start or expand businesses.

"I like the acronym 'FITE.' This is what we all must do on behalf of women and girls," [Secretary-General](#) Ban Ki-moon [told](#) the forum, co-organized by the UN Office for Partnerships (UNOP), the Business Civic Leadership Center, and the United States Chamber of Commerce.

"Investing in women is not just the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do," he said, citing a recent study showing that the Fortune 500 companies with the highest number of women on their boards were 53 per cent more profitable than those with the fewest women board members.

It was a message echoed by the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), which promotes industrial development for poverty reduction and inclusive globalization.

"If women are able to access credit to invest in business ventures, markets to sell their products, knowledge to expand their businesses, diversify and undertake value addition, they will be in a position to better contribute to economic growth and development," UNIDO Director-General Kandeh K. Yumkella [said](#), stressing the need to eliminate gender disparities in education.

From France, UN World Food Programme ([WFP](#)) Executive Director Josette Sheeran noted that "the sweat-stained face of a farmer, labouring under the hot sun to feed a hungry family, is likely to be that of a woman." But she also stressed that the face of those defeating hunger is also likely to be a woman's.

"Women are our hope; the secret weapon in fighting hunger," she said in a [message](#). "We have found that when women are front and centre, we succeed in our efforts to beat hunger and malnutrition."

In Monrovia, Liberia, a country that a decade ago was plagued by civil war but has since made great strides towards democracy and stability, Michelle Bachelet, Executive Director of UN Women, the new entity grouping together the work of four previous UN bodies, [marked](#) the Day with President Ellen-Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first democratically elected female head of State.

She called Liberia "a country where women's influence in forging peace and recovery offers lessons for all countries to advancing general equality and women's human rights."

In Darfur, where a war between the Sudanese Government, backed by militia allies, and various rebel groups has killed at least 300,000 people and displaced 2.7 million others since it erupted in 2003, the UN-African Union peacekeeping mission ([UNAMID](#)) celebrated the Day with a focus on this year's theme: equal access to education, training and science and technology. In El Fasher, capital of North Darfur, hundreds of women, men and children took part in a solidarity march.

And in another strife-plagued African country, Somalia, Mr. Ban's Special Representative Augustine Mahiga underscored the need to give women more opportunities to lead, decide on and deliver peace in a country that has had no functioning central government for 20 years and has been riven by factional and sectarian violence that has killed countless thousands and driven hundreds of thousands more from their homes.

"Women in your collective strength and disarming passion for peace, you must strive to be an indispensable factor in conflict resolution and peace making at all levels," he said in a message.

In Afghanistan, where 85 per cent of women are illiterate and only 37 per cent of the more than 7 million students in schools are girls, Special Representative Staffan de Mistura said it was up to all Afghans to make certain that strides for reconciliation and peace keep women's and girls' human rights at the centre of agreements.

Events marking the Day were held in many other centres around the world. In Geneva UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidibé [called](#) for "a world where; all women can protect themselves and their children from HIV; all women have access to HIV treatment; and women and girls do not fear rape, violence and HIV infection."

Also in Geneva, a group of UN independent experts issued a joint appeal to Government to enact urgently all laws and regulations necessary to ensure full women's rights to non-discrimination and equality.

And half a world away in Bangkok, the Executive Secretary of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific ([ESCAP](#)), Noeleen Heyzer, [hosted](#) a ceremony at which five young women from Japan, Myanmar, Thailand and India who are studying and working in Thailand spoke of their aspirations in relation to this year's theme.

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