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Empowering rural women key to boosting welfare of societies, UN officials stress



From right: Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, broadcaster Femi Oke and Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro at Women's Day event. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

7 March 2012 –

[Secretary-General](#) Ban Ki-moon today joined other senior United Nations officials on the eve of [International Women's Day](#) in highlighting the potential of rural women to improve the well-being of entire societies if given equal access to resources and set free from the discrimination and exploitation that hold them back.

“The plight of the world’s rural women and girls mirrors that of women and girls throughout society,” Mr. Ban [told](#) an event at UN Headquarters to commemorate the Day, which is observed annually on 8 March. This year’s theme is ‘[Empower Rural Women – End Hunger and Poverty](#).’

He acknowledged that women are increasingly exercising greater influence in business, government, politics, public administration and other professions. Also, 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,” said the Secretary-General.

Rural women and girls make up a 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, Mr. Ban said.

They perform most of the unpaid care work in rural areas and are a major part of the agricultural labour force, making up almost half a billion smallholder farmers and landless workers.

“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,” said the Secretary-General.

“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,” he added.

Michelle Bachelet, the Executive Director of the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women ([UN Women](#)), stated that no enduring solution to the major global challenges – from climate change to political and economic instability – can be solved without the full empowerment and participation of women across the world.

“We simply can no longer afford to leave women out,” Ms. Bachelet said in a recorded video [message](#). She is currently in Morocco, where she will tomorrow attend the observance of the Day to underline the need for women in the North African region to be fully involved in the democratic transition under way there.

“Women’s full and equal participation in the political and economic arena is fundamental to democracy and justice, which people are demanding. Equal rights and opportunity underpin healthy economies and societies,” said Ms. Bachelet.

She highlighted the fact that providing women farmers with equal access to resources would result in 100 to 150 million fewer hungry people, while ensuring that they have income, land rights and credit would mean fewer malnourished children.

“Studies show that higher levels of gender equality correlate positively with higher levels of per capita gross national product. Opening economic opportunities to women would significantly raise economic growth and reduce poverty,” she added.

In her [message](#) to mark the Day, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay urged governments, community leaders and heads of families to recognise and tap the enormous potential of women to positively impact the world around them.

“This is a call directed not at any particular region of the world – it is a global call because the failure to capitalise on women’s potential is a global problem,” she said.

She stressed that participation requires that women are able to access relevant information and are empowered through education and political access. She underlined the need to ensure inclusion of women from minority groups, the poor, the elderly, those with disabilities and other vulnerable groups.

Rashida Manjoo, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, [emphasized](#) the need for a holistic approach that does not treat all women homogenously, but recognizes that discrimination and violence affect women in different ways.

Rural women face discrimination in accessing assets and resources and are more likely to be involved in unpaid family-related work or in low-paid work. They are also at higher risk of being subjected to violence, with far less access to redress for the human rights violations they suffer.

“Legal and policy environments which are responsive and promote independence and empowerment of women is also essential for women to seek remedies for violations of rights,” said Ms. Manjoo.

The President of the General Assembly, Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, urged Member States, the UN system and partners to boost their efforts to empower rural women in view of their existing and potential contribution to the global fight against hunger and poverty.

“We need also to carry out extensive education and awareness-raising campaigns on the rights of women,” he said in an [address](#) delivered on his behalf by his Chef de Cabinet, Mutlaq Al-Qahtani.

“To empower rural women, more action is needed to improve the active participation of women in all political and economic decision-making processes at the local level,” he said.

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