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## **Women's participation in all aspects of society more vital than ever – UN officials**



International Women's Day 2012: equality begins at home for rural girls and women. Photo: IFAD

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Women's voices and their participation in all aspects of society are more important than ever, as witnessed last year in the context of the global economic crisis, political transitions in the Arab world and elsewhere, and environmental disasters, United Nations officials stressed today as they marked [International Women's Day](#).

Michelle Bachelet, Executive Director of the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women ([UN Women](#)), who travelled to Morocco to celebrate the Day, [highlighted](#) the role of women amid the political transitions in the Arab region, and called on world leaders to advance women's involvement in politics and empower them economically.

“Despite the steps taken forward and the progress made in many Arab States, women are demanding greater progress,” she said during a press conference in Rabat. “The distinction of having the world's lowest representation of women in politics and the labour force provides neither justice to Arab women nor to the history, legacy and future of the Arab world,” she said.

UN Independent Expert Kamala Chandrakirana, who heads a new group charged with identifying ways to eliminate existing discrimination practices against women, [echoed](#) Ms. Bachelet's remarks, warning that economic and political transitions are a crucial time to advance women's rights but warned that they are also at risk.

“In political transition, there is a danger of regression in the enjoyment by women of their human rights and women participating in public life are often exposed to violence,” Ms. Chandrakirana said. “States must take the opportunity of political transition to improve women's constitutional and political position, adopting positive measures to eliminate discrimination and promote the empowerment of women.”

She also stressed that the impact of an economic crisis is especially harsh for women “as a result of precarious employment, reduction in social security and deterioration in the care economy.”

Women are also more vulnerable during natural disasters, and the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Disaster Risk Reduction, Margareta Wahlström, [stressed](#) that countries need to educate women to be able to face them and to build resilience in the community as a whole.

“Women's lives are put in danger because they are treated like second-class citizens in some of the most hazard-prone regions of the world,” she said. “There is strong evidence to suggest that women are more likely to die in disasters than men and it is often because they are denied access to basic information about disaster risk and inhibited by social norms from escaping the home or workplace to avoid death.”

In his [message](#) to mark the Day, [Secretary-General](#) Ban Ki-moon noted that, from access to education and rights to land ownership, to political participation and equal remuneration, women still lag behind men even in countries where there have been significant efforts to address gender inequalities.

“Gender equality and the empowerment of women are gaining ground worldwide” he said, while warning that “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.” He underlined that countries should eliminate discriminatory laws and practices that have a negative effect not just on women but on entire communities and nations.

Unequal treatment of women can result in wider issues that affect societies as a whole. For example, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)) warned that laws in 25 countries that do not allow women to confer nationality on their children threaten to leave thousands of individuals in a state of statelessness. Currently, there are some 12 million people around the world who are not considered as nationals of any state, of whom half are children.

“A child born stateless today faces a future of uncertainty and insecurity,” [said](#) Erika Feller, UNHCR’s Assistant High Commissioner for Protection. “When there is discrimination in conferring nationality, we see children becoming stateless from the moment they’re born.”

This year’s theme for the Day, ‘Empower Rural Women – End Hunger and Poverty,’ focuses on providing opportunities for some of the poorest women around the world. The UN’s International Fund for Agricultural Development ([IFAD](#)), World Food Programme ([WFP](#)) and Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)) organized a discussion with various experts that focused on this particular issue.

“It is necessary that public investment, services and policies for agriculture and rural development be planned and implemented taking into consideration the different roles, interest and opportunities of women and men as farmers and agricultural workers,” [said](#) Carlos Seré, IFAD Chief Development Strategist.

Meanwhile, the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS ([UNAIDS](#)) stressed that women are key in the global fight against the deadly disease. “There are few sustainable solutions that enable women and girls to protect themselves from HIV, violence and poverty,” UNAIDS [said](#), adding that “empowered women and girls are critical agents of change in reversing the epidemic.”

The Day was observed in various parts of the world, from Afghanistan to Sudan. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan ([UNAMA](#)) [highlighted](#) its report on eliminating violence against women, which found both positive progress and gaps in the implementation of the relevant law in the country. The report noted that although law enforcement is improving, there is a long way to go before Afghan women are fully protected from violence.

In Somalia, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative, Augustine P. Mahiga, [spotlighted](#) the recent gains made towards increasing women’s representation in the ongoing peace process in the country through the roadmap, which encourages women and youth to engage in the political future of the country.

As part of the celebrations for the Day, the UN Population Fund ([UNFPA](#)) opened an [exhibition](#) at UN Headquarters in New York showcasing quilts made by women all over the world that display powerful messages and appeals for action.

In addition, Mr. Ban and the President of the General Assembly, Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, have [proposed](#) the convening of a global conference on women in 2015 – 20 years after the last women’s summit in Beijing.

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