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Role models, along with laws and policies, vital for empowering women – Ban



5 March 2010 – Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today repeated his call for ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls, stressing the need for not only effective laws and policies but also women who can serve as examples of empowerment to those around them.

“We can only win freedom from fear and space for women and girls to flourish by strong policies and laws, effective advocacy and the examples of role models,” Mr. Ban said in remarks to an event in New York, co-hosted by the UN human rights office (**OHCHR**) and the non-governmental group known as Equality Now, to mark the 15th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration.

“Role models such as the growing numbers of women leaders around the world... the women from all sectors of society who refuse to be subjugated... and our own brave women peacekeepers who are showing that they can perform the same roles, to the same standards and under the same difficult conditions as their male counterparts.”

In his **remarks**, delivered by Rachel Mayanja, the Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, Mr. Ban noted that 15 years ago the outcome of the Beijing conference marked a milestone on the road to empowerment for women and girls.

“It emphasized that equality, dignity and opportunity are inalienable rights for all,” he told attendees, which included Academy Award-winning actress Meryl Streep and playwright and activist Sarah Jones.

Adopted at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action remains the most comprehensive global policy framework to achieve the goals of gender equality, development and peace.

The Platform called for action on 12 key issues: poverty, education and training, health, violence against women, armed conflict, economy, power and decision-making, institutional mechanisms, human rights, media, environment, and girls.

And yet, he pointed out, violence and discrimination remain perhaps the biggest obstacle to achieving equality, opportunity and progress. "We must put an end to these abuses. We have come a long way, but we still have a long way to go."

The Commission on the Status of Women is under way in New York to assess progress made since the adoption of the landmark declaration in the Chinese capital 15 years ago.

This provides a "historic opportunity to develop solid evidence-based approaches and policies for women's advancement and protection of their rights," a group of independent UN human rights experts underlined in a media statement issued today on the occasion of International Women's Day, observed on 8 March.

Lessons gleaned from this stock-taking exercise, the nearly 30 experts said, "must guide us towards a new framework that provides for more accountability and a fresh vision on women's rights, and provides the space for negotiating a new social and gender contract."

More than a decade on from the Beijing gathering, they underscored the need for women to fully take part in all walks of life and for a "new vision" to protect not just their rights, but also to achieve peace, security and sustainable human development.

At an event in New York today, Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, Executive Director of the UN Population Fund (**UNFPA**), said that people are critical agents of change in all cultures, who must be engaged to promote the rights of women and protect them from violence.

Discriminatory attitudes and harmful practices are deeply rooted and are often stronger than the laws banning them, she said in a keynote speech at "2020 VISION, Mobilizing for Women's Rights and Eliminating Violence Against Women," which was organized by the Women's Learning Partnership and the Social Research journal at The New School for Social Research.

To end these practices, it is necessary to go deeper, to wear a "cultural lens," and to use "culturally-sensitive approaches" to promote change from within, she told the gathering, which brought together gender and social justice activists from Bahrain, Brazil, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon and Nigeria to share best practices.

"At UNFPA, we have learned that understanding the cultures in which we work and being able to identifying positive elements within them can facilitate lasting change," said Ms. Obaid.

"This is not to say that violations of human rights should go unchallenged. On the contrary. The advantage of culturally sensitive approaches is that they provide insights on how to align cultural practices and human rights most effectively."

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