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Women's empowerment lifts obstacles to achieving development goals, Ban says



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon addresses meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women

3 March 2010 – More than a decade after world leaders agreed to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, their empowerment remains a necessary element in attaining development targets, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said today.

"Until women and girls are liberated from poverty and injustice, all our goals – peace, security, sustainable development – stand in jeopardy," Mr. Ban **said** to the Commission on the Status of Women today, as the United Nations marked International Women's Day, which is observed annually on 8 March.

This year is the 15th anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – the outcome of the **Fourth World Conference on Women** in Beijing in 1995 – which remains the most comprehensive global policy framework to achieve the goals of gender equality, development and peace.

World leaders attending the summit in the Chinese capital declared that the full participation by women in all spheres of society, including the decision-making and access to power, are fundamental for development and peace.

Since the landmark gathering, there are signs of progress, the Secretary-General said today. Most girls now receive education, especially at the primary level, while a growing

number of countries have policies and legislation supporting gender equality and reproductive health in place.

Women, including Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro, former Tanzanian foreign minister, are more likely to participate in government, and are also mobilizing across the globe for equality and improvement, he said.

"So, as we look back on Beijing, we have much reason to be proud. Proud but not complacent," said Mr. Ban, who said that, as a son, husband, father and grandfather to girls, he has made women's empowerment a priority.

He pointed out that injustice and discrimination against women persist around the world, manifesting in violence in some cases. Over two thirds of women experience violence in their lifetime, most commonly at the hands of an intimate partner.

"We sometimes hear it said that such practices are a matter of culture," the Secretary-General said, strongly emphasizing that "they are not."

Last September, it was announced that four UN agencies and offices – including the UN Development Fund for Women (**UNIFEM**) – will be amalgamated to create a new single entity within the world body to promote the rights and well-being of women worldwide and to work towards gender equality.

Mr. Ban today urged the General Assembly to adopt a resolution "without delay" to set up this new entity.

He also expressed his wish to lead by example, citing the numerous achievements made by the UN to give women a stronger voice.

There are currently more women in senior posts at the Organization than at any other time in UN history, rising 40 per cent in the last three years.

"But this is not enough," the Secretary-General acknowledged, noting that women continue to be under-represented in areas such as peacekeeping.

He paid tribute to the UN's work on the ground, such as a new scheme using old technology to bring electricity to hundreds of villages in Burkina Faso to save hours of labour, thereby allowing women time to attend school and visit clinics.

"With initiatives such as these, we can improve the lives of hundreds of millions of women and girls," as well as achieve the Millennium Development Goals (**MDGs**), the eight globally-agreed targets to halve poverty, hunger, illiteracy and other problems, all by 2015, Mr. Ban said.

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (**IPU**), women **comprise** only 18.8 per cent of parliament members worldwide, shy of the 20 per cent target set by the UN Economic and Social Council (**ECOSOC**) and the Beijing Declaration.

In 44 chambers in nearly 40 nations, the 20 per cent goal has been met, but progress is lagging in regions such as the Middle East.

"Women's representation in parliaments is an accountability issue," said Rachel Mayanja, the Secretary-General's Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, at a press conference today in New York.

Parliaments, she emphasized, must be accountable to the entire population, including women.

The representation of women in governments reflects how democratic they are, Ms. Mayanja said, noting that countries where women are not greatly represented tend to be "less inclusive, less egalitarian and less democratic."

There also needs to be enhanced commitment at the highest levels – not just politics, but also other realms – to support women’s participation in the political process, she said.

For its part, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (**UNESCO**), together with international and regional media organizations, launched its annual “Women Make the News” (WMN) initiative, which seeks to increase adherence to the Beijing Declaration and promote gender equality in the media.

This year’s campaign seeks to initiate a global exchange on the importance and the need for gender-sensitive indicators for media organizations.

Organizations which have endorsed the initiative include the International Federation of Journalists, the European Broadcasting Union and the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union.

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