

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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MESSAGE ON INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

8 March 2005

This year marks a milestone in the movement for gender equality and the advancement of women -- the ten-year review of the Beijing Conference and Platform for Action. In 1995, women gathered in Beijing and took a giant step forward on behalf of humankind. As a result, the world recognized explicitly, as never before, that gender equality is critical to the development and peace of every nation. Ten years on, women are not only more aware of their rights; they are more able to exercise them.

Over this decade, we have seen tangible progress on many fronts. Life expectancy and fertility rates have improved. More girls are enrolled in primary education. More women are earning an income than ever before. At the same time, new challenges have emerged. Consider the trafficking of women and children -- an odious but increasingly common practice. Or the increasing targeting of women in armed conflict. Or the terrifying growth of HIV/AIDS among women -- especially young women.

Yet as we look back on the past decade, one thing stands out above all else: we have learnt that the challenges facing women are not problems without solutions. We have learnt what works and what doesn't. If we are to change the historical legacy that puts women at a disadvantage in most societies, we must implement what we have learnt on a larger scale. We must take specific, targeted action in a number of areas.

This year offers a precious opportunity for doing that, as the world's leaders prepare to gather for a summit at the United Nations in September to review progress in implementing the Millennium Declaration, agreed in 2000 by all the world's Governments as a blueprint for building a better world in the 21st century. As part of that process, I would urge the international community to remember that promoting gender equality is not only women's responsibility -- it is the responsibility of all of us.

Sixty years have passed since the founders of the United Nations inscribed, on the first page of our Charter, the equal rights of women and men. Since then, study after study has taught us that there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women. No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity, or to reduce infant and maternal mortality. No other policy is as sure to improve nutrition and promote health -- including the prevention of HIV/AIDS. No other policy is as powerful in increasing the chances of education for the next generation. And I would venture that no policy is more important in preventing conflict, or in achieving reconciliation after a conflict has ended.

Whatever the very real benefits of investing in women, the most important fact remains: women themselves have the right to live in dignity, in freedom from want and freedom from fear. On this International Women's Day, let us rededicate ourselves to making that a reality.