



PRESS RELEASE

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY - 2014

“Equality for Women is Progress for All”

KABUL, 7 March 2014 – As the United Nations prepares to celebrate International Women’s Day, which falls on 8 March annually, the UN system in Afghanistan is marking the Day with a recommitment to its efforts to help improve gender equality and women’s empowerment.

“The 21st century has to be different for every woman and girl in the world. She must know that to be born a girl is not the start of a life of hardship and disadvantage,” said the Executive Director of the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, in her message for the Day.

“Together we must ensure that: she is safe and secure from gender-based violence; she has human rights that are respected, including reproductive rights; she is empowered economically and in every way through education, equal opportunity, participation and leadership,” Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka added.

This year’s theme, ‘Equality for women is progress for all,’ emphasizes how gender equality, empowerment of women, women’s full enjoyment of human rights and the eradication of poverty are essential to economic and social development. It also stresses the vital role of women as agents of development.

In Afghanistan, the UN organizations operating there are celebrating the contributions of women, and recognizing that by addressing women’s rights the rights of all are addressed, in addition to highlighting how their participation in political and peace processes, and socio-economic activities, as key factors in ensuring the growth of the country.

The Secretary-General’s Special Representative and head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Ján Kubiš, has consistently highlighted the important role that women play in society, especially in light of the country’s upcoming Presidential and Provincial Council elections, slated to take place on 5 April.

“Substantial participation of women in the upcoming elections is critical to the credibility and inclusiveness of the process,” said Mr. Kubiš. “Women are also needed as candidates, campaigners and electoral workers, and particularly as female election observers whose presence would be essential for safeguarding women’s votes.”

There are continuing trends of violations of women's rights – including brutal attacks, targeted killings of high-profile female government and police officials and a reduction in the quota for women in Provincial Councils – which highlight the work still needed in order to guarantee women’s and girls' rights.

The United Nations remains committed to supporting the Government of Afghanistan in meeting its national and international obligations and commitments impacting women and girls, particularly the country’s Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) Law, as well as the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). For the world body, these are considered essential for ensuring women have equal opportunities to participate in decision-making within all aspects of life, including political and peace processes.

“Given equal opportunities, Afghan women have the capacity to bring significant positive changes to the lives of their families and communities. UNDP works with its partners to make sure Afghan women can reach their full potential and contribute to better lives for all and a more resilient Afghanistan,” said the Country Director for the UN Development Programme (UNDP), Alvaro Rodriguez.

The United Nations also stresses the critical need to engage the country’s youth as key actors in breaking the cycle of gender-based violence, as well as issues such as child marriage. UN agencies and their national partners work together to promote awareness and mobilize communities, social leaders, particularly to engage men, boys and youth.

“One of the faces of inequality and gender-based violence in Afghanistan is early marriage,” said the Representative of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), Dr. Annette Sachs Robertson. “Early marriage denies a girl of her childhood, disrupts her education, limits her opportunities, increases her risk of violence and abuse, and jeopardizes her health. When women can exercise the right to plan their future, families, safely deliver healthy babies and fulfill their human potential, progress reaches every corner of society.”

She also urged Afghanistan to support girls to fulfill their potential.

Afghanistan’s decades-long conflict has made it the contaminated country in the world in terms of mine and Explosive Remnants of War (ERW), which, in turn, has placed an economic and psychological burden on women there. While just five per cent of mine/ERW victims in Afghanistan are women, women make up the largest group of indirect victims, as the spouses, mothers, sisters and daughters, and subsequent caregivers, of men and boys disabled by ERW. Also, as survivors of mine and ERW incidents, women are disproportionately vulnerable to isolation, discrimination, and violence and are less likely to receive financial support.

“International Women’s Day is an opportunity to acknowledge the often invisible contribution made by Afghanistan’s women in coping with the long-term impact of armed conflict. As more attention is paid to the plight of women, we will find better strategies to enable women, whether survivors or caregivers, to live active and fulfilled lives,” said the Country Representative for the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS), Abigail Hartley.

In his remarks for the Day, the Acting Representative in Afghanistan of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Yumiko Takashima, noted that “Afghan returnee women and girls constitute about half of the more than 5.8 million refugees who have returned home, of whom 4.7 million came under the voluntary repatriation operation launched in 2002 by UNHCR. Around the world, including in Afghanistan, women and girls face specific risks, and therefore, UNHCR’s priority in Afghanistan in 2014 is to promote gender equality ensuring their equal access to protection and assistance.”

Today, the United Nations joins the people of Afghanistan in celebrating the progress already made towards gender equality and women’s empowerment.

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