

## **Exercising Power for Change** **Statement by Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Director of UNIFEM,** **on the occasion of International Women's Day**

**United Nations, New York, 8 March 2006** — International Women's Day 2006 is a time of celebration and reflection. We celebrate the significant progress that has been made in building a positive environment for gender equality and women's empowerment worldwide. To date, 181 countries have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); over 120 have adopted national plans of action for gender equality. Countries emerging from conflict are incorporating provisions for gender equality within their constitutions while others are adopting laws and policies to strengthen women's access to health, education and employment opportunities and to end impunity for gender-based violence. And women are increasing their representation in high-level decision-making, as highlighted by the election of Africa's first woman president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia, and of Michelle Bachelet as Chile's first woman president.

UNIFEM is proud to be part of the local, national, and global efforts that have contributed to these achievements. But on this day especially, we also have to ask what impact these laws and policies have made in the day to day lives of women, especially poor women, on the ground.

On International Women's Day, as we remember the women shirtwaist workers who lost their lives in the New York City sweatshop factory fire — unable to get out because the doors were locked — it is important to look at the terms and conditions in which so many women and men work to earn their living — for wages that are too meagre to enable them to lift themselves and their families out of poverty.

In our global world, women are entering the work force in greater and greater numbers. However, rather than benefiting from the new opportunities opened by globalization, women are less likely than men to hold paid and regular jobs and more often work in the informal economy, which provides little financial security and no social benefits. Nearly 330 million working women earn less than \$1 a day — 60 per cent of working people who are still living in poverty. No wonder poverty still has a woman's face, that it is passed on from generation to generation, that girls are pulled out of school to help make ends meet.

This is a critical moment in the struggle for gender equality, one which cannot be de-linked from larger political and economic shifts. The first target of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), endorsed by the world's leaders in 2000, gender parity in primary and secondary education by 2005, has already been missed. This is a warning we must take seriously or we will not be able to achieve the MDGs by 2015.

To bring change to the lives of women on the ground, women need to take power into their own hands. Women who have broken through gender, class and ethnic barriers have an opportunity to show their leadership and build strong and strategic partnerships. Today, there are twice as many women in powerful economic decision making positions than there were five years ago — there are 20 Ministers of Finance; 10 Ministers of Economy, Economic Planning and/or Development; and 11 Ministers or Secretaries of State addressing Budgets, Taxes, Auditing, Investments and Revenue.

Today, we call for a Global Coalition of Women Economic Decision-Makers — committed to making change happen in the lives of ordinary women and men on the ground.

It is important to act now. With the large increase in official development assistance that is anticipated with the roll-out of the new aid agenda, these women can be the building blocks of a power coalition to

reshape macroeconomic decision-making — and eliminate the poverty, inequality and insecurity that define the lives of so many.

To move from numbers to influence, from a numerical to a strategic presence in decision-making, we need to show the world how change happens for gender equality and women's empowerment. To do this, we need to empower grass-roots and women's organizations to exercise a watchdog function. They can then help to make sure that national resources are allocated all the way to the ground and can bring realities and strategies from the ground to inform policy direction. We need to bring underrepresented and excluded groups, such as HIV+ women, women informal workers, indigenous women, women survivors of violence, rural poor women into the development process.

The Global Coalition can build the power to ensure that by 2008 we will have full and equal financing for development, so that by 2015 we will have made progress on each of the Millennium Development Goals, and on every dimension of gender equality and women's empowerment. This includes stronger economic security and rights, greater participation in political decision-making, equal access to all levels of education, and lives free of violence.

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*UNIFEM is the women's fund at the United Nations, providing financial support and technical assistance to innovative programmes promoting women's human rights, their economic and political empowerment, and gender equality in more than 100 countries. In 2006, UNIFEM is commemorating its 30th anniversary. For more information, visit [www.unifem.org](http://www.unifem.org). UNIFEM, 304 East 45th Street, 15th Floor, New York, NY 10017. Tel: +1 212-906-6400. Fax: +1 212-906-6705.*