

Equality, Development and Peace Means Ending Violence against Women

International Women's Day, 8 March 2007

Message by Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Director, UNIFEM

[International Women's Day](#) is the story of women's organizing for equality, justice and peace. Marked by women's groups around the world, it is rooted in the centuries-old struggle of women to bring about a better world. Its commemoration began in 1911 in Europe with a March 19 rally for women's right to vote and took on new momentum after more than 140 working women lost their lives in a fire in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City a week later. It grew in following years as women held rallies each year to protest the devastation of World War I.

This year as always the day is an opportunity for reflection and renewal. In the 12 years since the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing, the signs of progress are many. There is global recognition that gender equality is central to human development and human security, as stated in the Millennium Declaration. The HIV/AIDS pandemic is now seen as a gender issue as well as a health issue; rape has been recognized as a weapon of war and a crime against humanity. Women's human rights — monitored and upheld by the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW), now ratified by 185 countries — are now on every major agenda, national, regional and international.

At the country level too, there is much to celebrate. Laws and policies are being adopted to strengthen women's economic security in such vital areas as land, property and inheritance rights, decent employment, and access to credit and markets. Quotas or other affirmative measures have been adopted to increase women's representation in political decision-making in at least 95 countries, including many countries emerging from conflict.

But all of this progress can be destroyed through continuing violence against women. Violence against women is deeply rooted in structures of gender inequality. It fuels the spread of HIV/AIDS and destroys women's ability to break through inter-generational cycles of poverty. Such violence, already horrific in times of peace, intensifies during armed conflict as legal and justice systems break down along with systems of social and community support. Whether in peace or in war, violence against women takes a huge toll — from individuals and societies both.

Fortunately, more and more countries are recognizing these links, acknowledging that until they eliminate persistent gender inequalities and discrimination, both human security and human development will remain a distant dream — along with all of the Millennium Development Goals. Governments are beginning to act: according to the [Secretary-General's recent report](#), 89 states have legislative provisions on domestic violence, 104 countries have made marital rape a crime and 93 states prohibit trafficking in human beings. What is urgently needed is implementation.

UNIFEM has worked with women's groups and governments for over two decades to end the multiple forms of violence in women's lives. What we have learned is that ending violence against women requires multiple strategies working across sectors and at different levels. Laws must be accompanied by resource allocations, institutional regulations and guidelines and systematic training for officials who will monitor and enforce them — including police and judiciary, health and social service providers. Ending violence against women also requires changing public perceptions and breaking through barriers of culture and tradition to find non-violent ways to resolve conflicts in personal and public life.

In the last decade, UNIFEM has spearheaded a set of regional and global advocacy campaigns, working with governments, women’s groups and the media to change laws, develop national action plans and scale up community-based interventions to end violence against women and girls. Since 2005, the [UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women](#), which UNIFEM manages, has supported Governments and NGOs to implement these laws, policies and action plans. Now we are taking this struggle to the next stage — to institutionalize the strategic, practical actions that can bring about change, and incorporate them into national development planning, and state accountability mechanisms.

This year marks the [10th Anniversary of the UN Trust Fund](#). Ten years of innovation, experience and activism have shown that ending violence against women is possible. What is needed now is a serious strategy and resources to upscale the work through a strong gender entity within the UN system, bringing the system together to promote the strategies and practices that have worked. Only then can the UN, in partnership with Member States and the women’s movement, be at the forefront of efforts to end this scourge. Only then will violence against women become a rare occurrence rather than a global pandemic.

On this International Women’s Day we owe it to women around the world to take this challenge seriously — to end violence against women, and strike a blow for equality, development and peace.