

UNITED NATIONS



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**THE SECRETARY- GENERAL**

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**MESSAGE FOR INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY**

**New York, 8 March 2015**

Twenty years ago, when the world convened a landmark conference on women's human rights, the devastating conflict in the former Yugoslavia prompted deserved attention to rape and other war crimes there against civilians. Two decades later, with girls as young as seven not only targeted but used as weapons by violent extremists, it would be easy to lose heart about the value of international gatherings. But while we have a long way to go to achieve full equality – with ending gender-based violence a central goal – progress over the past two decades has proven the enduring value of the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women.

Since the adoption of its Declaration and Platform for Action, more girls have attained more access to more education than ever before. The number of women dying in childbirth has been almost halved. More women are leading businesses, governments and global organizations. I welcome these advances. At the same time, on this International Women's Day, we must acknowledge that the gains have been too slow and uneven, and that we must do far more to accelerate progress everywhere.

The world must come together in response to the targeting of women and girls by violent extremists. From Nigeria and Somalia to Syria and Iraq, the bodies of women have been transformed into battlegrounds for warriors carrying out specific and systematic strategies, often on the basis of ethnicity or religion. Women have been attacked for trying to exercise their right to education and basic services; they have been raped and turned into sex slaves; they have been given as prizes to fighters, or traded among extremist groups in trafficking networks. Doctors, nurses and others have been assassinated for trying to operate in their professional capacity. The women human rights defenders brave enough to challenge such atrocities risk – and sometimes lose – their lives for the cause.

We must take a clear global stance against this total assault on women's human rights. The international community needs to translate its outrage into meaningful action, including humanitarian aid, psycho-social services, support for livelihoods, and efforts to bring perpetrators to justice. With women and girls often the first targets of attack, their rights must be at the centre of our strategy to address this staggering and growing challenge. Empowered women and girls are the best hope for sustainable development following conflict. They are the best drivers of growth, the best hope for reconciliation, and the best buffer against radicalization of youth and the repetition of cycles of violence.

Even in societies at peace, too many girls and women are still targets of domestic abuse, female genital mutilation and other forms of violence that traumatize individuals and damage whole societies. Discrimination remains a thick barrier that must be shattered. We need to

expand opportunities in politics, business and beyond. We need to change mind-sets, especially among men, and engage men in becoming active change-agents themselves. And we must back up our resolve with resources based on the sure understanding that investments in gender equality generate economic progress, social and political inclusion and other benefits that, in turn, foster stability and human dignity.

This is a vital year for advancing the cause of women's human rights. The international community is hard at work on establishing a new sustainable development agenda that will build on the Millennium Development Goals and shape policies and social investments for the next generation. To be truly transformative, the post-2015 development agenda must prioritize gender equality and women's empowerment. The world will never realize 100 per cent of its goals if 50 per cent of its people cannot realize their full potential. When we unleash the power of women, we can secure the future for all.