



International Women's Day 2010 Equal Rights, Equal Opportunities: Progress for All

This year marks the 15th anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the outcome of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The Beijing Platform – the most comprehensive global policy framework to achieve the goals of gender equality, development and peace – called for action on 12 key issues:

Poverty | education and training | health | violence against women | armed conflict | economy | power and decision-making | institutional mechanisms | human rights | media | environment | girls

In recognition of this important anniversary, the theme of this year's International Women's Day – which is observed worldwide on 8 March – is **Equal Rights, Equal Opportunities: Progress for All**.

Since the Beijing Conference, progress has been made in a number of areas, most significantly in education. However, while gender-sensitive legislation and policies have addressed inequalities and discrimination against women, overall progress remains uneven. Disparities exist between regions and within countries. Global averages also hide differences among women based on location, economic status, ethnicity, age, disability and other factors.

Many challenges to gender equality and women's empowerment require urgent attention.

- Little progress has been made on reducing **maternal mortality** rates. Every year, 536,000 women and girls die as a result of complications during pregnancy, childbirth or following delivery, the overwhelming majority in developing countries. Most of these complications are largely preventable and treatable.
- **Violence against women and girls** is a global pandemic, with up to 70 per cent of women experiencing violence in their lifetime. The problem remains universal, with women and girls affected by violence in every region and every country.
- Access to labour markets and to **decent work** remains limited for women. In 2008, an estimated 52.6 per cent of women were in the labour force, compared with 77.5 per cent of men. Women are more likely than men to have low-paid, low-status and vulnerable jobs, with limited or no social protection or basic rights. A very high proportion of women in the labour force continues to work in the informal economy.
- Serious challenges persist to women's full and equal participation in senior **decision-making positions**. These include negative stereotypes about women's leadership roles and potential, a lack of commitment by political parties and men leaders, inadequate funding and training for women candidates and government officials, and discriminatory selection processes in all sectors and at all levels.
- Women continue to be excluded from or seriously **under-represented in peace negotiations**, peacebuilding and disarmament processes. Since 1992, women represented, on average, just

7.1 per cent of official delegation members, and only 2.1 per cent of signatories to peace agreements. To date, very few women have been formal mediators.

Why do so many challenges remain? Several factors have been found to limit progress on all key issues.

- The prevalence of negative **gender stereotypes** based on societal beliefs and attitudes affects women and men and constrains their opportunities and choices. Stereotypical assumptions about women in the labour market lead to occupational segregation and a gender wage gap, while the stereotypical view of men as breadwinners limits their involvement in family life.
- Limited involvement on the part of **men and boys** restrains advances towards gender equality in all areas. Focusing attention on gender issues and building support for social change can only be achieved when men and boys are engaged, for instance, in measures to eliminate violence against women and overcome stereotypes.
- Women's under-representation in **decision-making** positions in all sectors limits the incorporation of gender perspectives in public policies and programmes. For example, the absence of women in top positions in peace processes limits the attention given to gender in peace agreements.
- **Violence against women** represents an obstacle to progress in many sectors, including health, education and employment. Sexual violence at and on the way to school, for instance, is a major impediment to girls' participation in education.
- Women continue to be responsible for most domestic and **caregiving work**. This unequal sharing of responsibilities negatively impacts their educational and employment opportunities, and limits their involvement in public life.

Moving forward, governments must give priority attention to addressing the challenges faced by women. It is not enough to adopt laws and policies; they have to be effectively implemented.

Measures to help ensure successful implementation include training public officials, raising women's awareness of their legal rights, and allocating adequate resources. The share of budgets and of development assistance specifically dedicated to gender equality and women's empowerment should be increased.

Political will and leadership is critical for generating sustained action for gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, and for progress in development, peace, security and human rights. Only then will States be able to finish the agenda they committed to 15 years ago in Beijing, achieve the Millennium Development Goals and respond effectively to global crises.

For further information and resources on International Women's Day 2010, visit:
<http://www.un.org/events/women/iwd/2010/>

For further information on the 15-year review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, visit:
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing15/index.html>