

Statement

by

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Secretary-General,

Thank you for your kind words, and your leadership and commitment to ensuring that the scourge of AIDS is ended.

Her Majesty, Queen Noor,
Dr. Lee,
Distinguished Guests,
Mr. Moderator,

Today, millions of women and men across the world are celebrating International Women's Day. They are calling attention to specific ills and discriminatory practices hindering, or harmful to, women's advancement and empowerment through gatherings such as ours, through marches, films, protests, workshops and websites.

We women, are no longer aiming solely at equality with men in every field, but at opening up avenues for us to have the widest possible opportunity for employment, for a place in decision-making, for shaping government policies, for access to training and services in health, banking and credit, for ownership of land, property and inheritance, for the right to citizenship and nationality, for the right to be free from violence and for the right to stand for and vote in elections for the right to own condoms. In this way women can contribute fully to the enjoyment of basic human rights, sustainable development and durable peace for all people.

We have come a long way since International Women's Day was first celebrated at the United Nations. It took place in 1975 as part of the events of International Women's Year and in preparation for the First World Conference on Women held in Mexico City, in June of that year.

I would like to pay tribute to those women who first initiated the celebration of the Day in the Organization. They were the members of what is now known as the Group of Equal

Rights for Women in the UN (GERWUN). Subsequently in 1977, International Women's Day was designated by the General Assembly as an annual event and became a UN tradition.

Most themes in the early years were devoted to improving the status of women in the United Nations Secretariat. The seed that was sown by a small group three decades ago has grown enormously to cover themes on the global agenda. Recent Days have included violence against women, gender equality issues in peace and security, women in Afghanistan, and gender in the Millennium Development Goals, to name a few. The Day has become a time to celebrate individual acts of courage and determination by women working in their communities with men, and a time for both stocktaking and forward looking.

This shift is in no small measure due to the Commission on the Status of Women. This is the main intergovernmental body of the United Nations charged since 1946 with promoting women's rights and their advancement and empowerment.

Over the years the Commission has effectively and persuasively chipped away at flagrant discrimination based on gender such as excessive poverty among women and girls, their lack of education and training, and HIV/AIDS and the girl child. Through skilled negotiation and compromise the Commission has boldly brought to the table what were, until a few years ago, unspoken taboos such as domestic violence against women, female genital mutilation, marital rape, honour killings and male dominance which deprives women of the right to control and safeguard their own bodies, their sexuality and their reproductive health. These are some of the key issues which combine to make women and girls especially vulnerable to the HIV/AIDS pandemic --- the topic selected by the UN Inter-agency Network on Women and Gender Equality for this year's event.

The Commission's work through the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly has created gender sensitive awareness and proposed practical actions that have been reflected in the outcomes of several interrelated international world conferences on women, human rights, population and social development, The impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on women was particularly stressed in the special sessions of the General Assembly on Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the Twenty-first Century and on HIV/AIDS. These and other fora have kept these issues to the forefront of the global agenda culminating in the Millennium Summit and its Declaration and the Goals which we are striving to meet by 2015.

Hardly anyone in this audience needs to be reminded that although HIV/AIDS affects both women and men, recent data show that it takes a much greater toll among women and girls than on men. Not only is the disease striking at women and girls, but at the continent of Africa and the Caribbean. Women who were a minority of those infected 20 years ago, now comprise over 58 per cent of those infected in Sub-Saharan Africa and almost 50 per cent worldwide. They represent almost half of the 18 million of those who died, and constitute the majority of the newly infected.

Visitors to countries stricken by the pandemic, including myself, are profoundly shocked to see villages filled with orphans without adults, pupils without teachers, the sick without doctors, fields without crops and communities depressed by hopelessness, alienation and a loss

of control. We heard last week in one of the Commission's panels, Wanaina Njoki, eloquently state that there is hardly a single family in Africa today which does not face death, their own death or that of a family member. Facing this stark reality can be an opportunity for change and transformation as people became more willing to abandon traditional ways and stereotypes and partner with others to find real solutions.

Today's "third wave" of HIV/AIDS, targeting more women than men, now has devastating social and economic effects. A World Bank study estimates that some countries, like Zimbabwe, will see a 30 per cent drop in gross domestic product. In Botswana, average life expectancy has already dropped from 69 to 44 years. Zambia is losing 1,000 teachers a year without replacements and over one million children have no teachers. Swaziland will lose one third of its civil servants in this decade. More than 14 million children are orphans.

In terms of funding, WHO and UNAIDS calculates that only around 10 billion dollars are required to implement prevention and care programmes thus averting 29 million of the 45 million HIV infections projected to occur by 2010. Despite this relatively small sum, we witness \$840 billion spent annually on military budgets.

While there is much cause for concern, there is also hope. Encouraging signs are the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, bilateral funds, WHO's 3 by 5 Initiative, and the launching last month of the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS. Perhaps the most compelling example are the millions of courageous women and men in Botswana, Brazil, Cambodia, Romania, Senegal, Thailand, Uganda and Zambia, who with their governments, donor countries, the private sector and civil society, prove daily that the spread of HIV/AIDS can be contained. And that, with the empowerment of women and partnership with men, the goal of halting and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS, is within our reach.

With women working effectively with men, young girls with boys --- another lesson learned through the recent debates in the Commission --- we can end human suffering, discrimination and inequality.

I believe that what we learn today from our distinguished panellists will make our commitments stronger than ever.

Thank you.
