

International Women's Day, 8 March 2005
Message of Thoraya Ahmed Obaid
UNFPA Executive Director

As world leaders and women's organizations gather in New York for the 10-year review of the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women, it is clear that governments in all regions have made substantial progress in adopting legislation and policies to protect women's human rights. In the last decade, legal and policy frameworks for gender equality have been strengthened. The challenge now is to enforce the laws that have been put into place and translate existing policies into concrete programmes that benefit women and girls.

The theme of this year's International Women's Day, Gender Equality Beyond 2005: Building a More Secure Future, recognizes that greater progress to protect the rights of women and ensure their full participation in decision-making is essential for peace, development and equality. A lot remains to be done. Today, only 15 countries have reached the target of 30 per cent of women in parliaments. High levels of gender-based violence in conflict zones, the growth in trafficking of women and children, high levels of maternal mortality, rising rates of HIV infection among women and girls, and the persistence of harmful traditional practices all point to the need for greater awareness and collective action.

Since traditions and practices are often stronger than law, greater efforts must be made to empower women, foster community participation, involve men and use culturally sensitive approaches. Today, I call on all leaders to question and ignite debate on whether practices that discriminate against women and girls are contributing to the well-being of individuals, families and communities. There is a growing body of evidence, which shows that providing equal access to education and health services, income-earning opportunities and legal rights benefits not only women, but all members of society. It unleashes the full potential of half the human race to contribute to greater social and economic progress for all.

Of central importance are reproductive health and rights, as world leaders agreed in Cairo at the International Conference on Population and Development and in Beijing at the Fourth World Conference on Women. All individuals have the right to reproductive health; to determine freely and responsibly the number, timing and spacing of their children and to have the information and means to do so; and to make decisions concerning reproduction free of coercion, discrimination and violence. Reproductive health and rights are key to women's empowerment and gender equality and the achievement of international development goals. Reproductive health services prevent unintended pregnancies and abortion, HIV infection, maternal, infant and child mortality, and save lives.

Today, on International Women's Day, I urge governments and the international community to reaffirm and reinforce their commitment to the Beijing Platform for Action as they work to reduce poverty and achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Let us assert once again that each woman and girl is a unique and valuable human being who is entitled to equal opportunities and universally adopted human rights, no matter where she is born or where she lives. Now is the time to energize efforts to put gender equality at the top of the international peace and development agenda.

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