

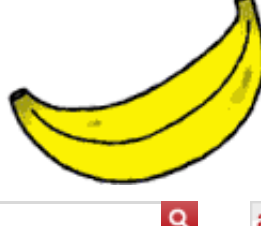


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International Women's Day: Discrimination still endures, UN says

Tue, Mar 08 2011 17:29 CET | by The Sofia Echo staff | 1253 Views | 1 Comment



Photo: Reuters

A hundred years after more than a million women poured out onto the streets around the world on the first International Women's Day, the United Nations used the anniversary on March 8 2011 to warn that despite the gains, made much remains to be done to eliminate gender discrimination, the UN News Service said.

"In too many countries and societies, women remain second-class citizens," UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said.

"Although the gender gap in education is closing, there are wide differences within and across countries, and far too many girls are still denied schooling, leave prematurely or complete school with few skills and fewer opportunities.

"Women and girls also continue to endure unacceptable discrimination and violence, often at the hand of intimate partners or relatives. In the home and at school, in the workplace and in the community, being female too often means being vulnerable. And in many conflict zones, sexual violence is deliberately and systematically used to intimidate women and whole communities."

Ban cited the urgent need for significant progress in women's and children's health. He said that while in the realm of decision-making more women in more countries are taking their rightful seat in parliament, fewer than 10 per cent of countries have women heads of state or government.

Even where women are prominent in politics, they are often severely underrepresented in other areas of decision-making, including at the highest levels of business and industry, he added. This year's observance focuses on equal access to education, training, and science and technology.

"Only through women's full and equal participation in all areas of public and private life can we hope to achieve the sustainable, peaceful and just society promised in the United Nations Charter," Ban said.

Michelle Bachelet, Executive Director of UN Women, the new entity grouping together the work of four previous UN bodies, highlighted the gains made since those marches of 100 years ago, when only two countries allowed women to vote, compared with virtually universal suffrage today, with women elected to lead governments in every continent.

But, she said as quoted by the UN News Service: "I suspect those courageous pioneers would look at our world today with a mixture of pride and disappointment. There has been remarkable progress as the last century has seen an unprecedented expansion of women's legal rights and entitlements. Indeed, the advancement of women's rights can lay claim to be one of the most profound social revolutions the world has seen..."

"But despite this progress over the last century, the hopes of equality expressed on that first International Women's Day are a long way from being realized. Almost two out of three illiterate adults are women. Girls are still less likely to be in school than boys. Every 90 seconds of every day, a woman dies in pregnancy or due to childbirth-related complications despite us having the knowledge and resources to make birth safe," she said.

Bachelet emphasised that across the world, women continue to earn less than men for the same work, and in many countries they have unequal access to land and inheritance rights.

Despite high-profile advances, women still make up only 19 per cent of legislatures, eight per cent of peace negotiators, and only 28 women are heads of state or government, she said.

"I have seen myself what women, often in the toughest circumstances, can achieve for their families and societies if they are given the opportunity," said Bachelet, a former president of Chile. "The strength, industry and wisdom of women remain humanity's greatest untapped resource. We simply cannot afford to wait another 100 years to unlock this potential."

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay devoted her message to the courageous role women played in the recent peaceful mass movements that saw the ouster of the entrenched leaders of Tunisia and Egypt.

"The work, however, is far from over," Pillay said. "In these moments of historic transition in Egypt and Tunisia, it is important to ensure that women's rights are not set aside as something to be dealt with after the 'crucial' reforms are won. Women's rights should be at the top of the list of new priorities."

She noted concerns that constitutional reviews and the development of reforms are undertaken without women's full participation.

"In fact, there are worrying signs about the content of some proposed reforms in Egypt being downright discriminatory," she said. "The women and men in the Middle East and North Africa must ensure this is not the case."

All over the world, major disparities remain between female and male access to education, employment and salaries, she added, emphasising that while women are the world's main food producers and their working hours are longer than those of men, women earn only 10 per cent of the world's income and own less than one per cent of property worldwide. They also comprise nearly two thirds of the world's 759 million illiterate adults.

Highlighting the many advances in women's and girls' health in the last 100 years, such as reforms of the minimum age of marriage and sexual consent, safe abortions, contraception, mammograms, and progress towards ending sexual and gender-based violence, including female genital mutilation, UN World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Margaret Chan also said that women's health involves much more than reproduction.

"We are also faced with challenges," she said. "Maternal mortality rates and HIV rates among young women are still too high, tobacco consumption among women is increasing, sexual and other forms of gender-based violence continue to be widespread, and there is an increasingly heavy burden of non-communicable diseases on women," she added, underscoring how lack of education negatively affects fertility, smoking rates, and HIV prevention.

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