



International Women's Day 2009

Opinion Piece by Navanethem Pillay
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I have much to celebrate on International Women's Day. In my lifetime, I have seen unimaginable change, in my own country and around the world. I have seen the power of ordinary people who have stood up against the injustices they faced and who have triumphed against all odds. As a woman of color raised in poverty, I have experienced gender, race and class discrimination. Today, I am celebrating the power of women, the power to overcome the particular vulnerabilities resulting from these multiple forms of discrimination.

As a young law student in South Africa under apartheid, I was warned not to expect that white secretaries would take instruction from me. I was lucky when I graduated to be taken on by a black lawyer, but he first made me promise not to get pregnant. As UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, my mandate is the protection and promotion of human rights, including women's rights, for all women. I am concerned that the global economic crisis we are currently facing will have a disproportionate impact on women. Women are the majority of the poor and disenfranchised. Women face deprivation of economic and social rights, as well as civil and political rights. The recognition of all these rights, to which women are entitled, is fundamental to the empowerment of women.

Women still do not get equal pay for equal work, and women do not enjoy the legal protections afforded to others in the workplace. Domestic workers, particularly migrant workers, often fall outside the scope of labor laws. In many countries, laws restrict women's access to financial independence, discriminating against them in matters of employment, property and inheritance. In addition, economic policies often discriminate against women, exacerbating the gap between rich and poor and depriving women of sustainable means of livelihood.

Violence against women compounds their vulnerability. The UN regards it as a "pandemic." As an advocate working against domestic violence, I have seen first-hand the impact of this violence on women, children, and families, wrecked by these crimes that are too often hidden and protected by impunity. Just as violence against women is a weapon of domination in the home, violence against women is a weapon of war in armed conflict. As a judge on the UN Rwanda Tribunal, I heard women testify to atrocities of sexual violence and saw how this violence had been used to destroy families and communities.

Despite the enormity of violence and discrimination against women, today I am celebrating. I am celebrating the power of women whose spirit cannot be broken, who survive and even thrive. I am celebrating the vision of equality

between women and men that is enshrined in the framework of international human rights law, and our collective efforts to move towards that vision and make it a reality for all women and men around the world. I am also celebrating the growing number of men who understand that sex equality benefits men and women both and who work to end violence and discrimination against women. The theme of this year's International Women's Day, "Women and Men: United to End Violence against Women," is not only a recognition, but also a call to action underpinning a global campaign launched by the UN Secretary-General.

There are benchmarks of progress – women in parliament, women heads of state, women on the highest courts, and women in the United Nations. Perhaps as a result, I see girls around the world growing up with a different sense of themselves than I and most women of my generation were given. These girls are powerful – they say no to harmful practices such as early marriage, female genital mutilation, and sexual harassment. They want to go to school and get an education. They want to be lawyers, doctors, judges, members of parliament. They want to change the world they live in. I know they will, and I celebrate these girls on International Women's Day. They are our future.

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Notes for editors:

The United Nations Country Team in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is committed to supporting the efforts of the Government to improve the life of all citizens, especially those most vulnerable. We shall continue to work closely with the Government and all development partners for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Our collective endeavour is to assist the people of Lao PDR to achieve progress and better standards of living for all.