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International Women's Day 2009 **“Women and men united to end violence against women and girls”**

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International Women's Day is an occasion to reflect on where we are in our struggle for equality, peace and development, and a chance to unite and mobilize for meaningful change. This year there is much to celebrate. The vision women marched for over a century ago, of a life free of poverty and violence, has spread to countries around the globe. People everywhere believe that lives of men and women can be different, and governments have the fundamental obligation to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights.

For over two decades, women's rights advocates have lobbied, campaigned and marched to put gender equality on the public policy agenda, demanding recognition that women's rights are human rights, and that violence against women and girls be addressed within the human rights framework.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted in 1979, recognized gender discrimination as the root of violence against women. In 1993, at the World Conference on Human Rights, governments recognized women's rights as human rights, and that violence against women is an abuse of these rights.

Violence against women undermines poverty reduction and development efforts; hampers women's agency and productivity; destroys their health; prevents girls from attending school, and being safe; and has been a silent driver of the rapid feminization of HIV and AIDS. It is no coincidence that the deadline for the Secretary-General's UNiTE to End Violence against Women Campaign is 2015, the deadline to achieve the eight Millennium Development Goals. In doing so, the campaign locates ending violence against women alongside the eight Millennium Development Goals—and basic to their achievement.

The 2000 Millennium Declaration recognized the global potential to realize a new vision, and the dangers that threaten it, including gender-based violence. The same year, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325, recognizing the impact of war on women and women's role in peace-building. This was strengthened in 2008 by Resolution 1820, recognizing sexual violence in conflict as a security issue, demanding a security response.

Mid-way to 2015, the momentum is building. A total of 185 states have ratified the CEDAW Convention, and 90 have ratified its optional protocol, giving individuals and groups of women the right to take complaints about violations of their rights directly to the Commission and request an investigation. Most states have adopted laws and policies to eliminate gender discrimination in health and education, employment and political life and at least 89 states have some legislative provisions to address domestic violence. Rape is now a crime in almost all states, and marital rape can be prosecuted in at least 104 states.

Today it is vital to sustain this momentum. Gains can be reversed, as we witness every day. While the implementation gap narrows, new threats arise, including climate change, widespread food insecurity and a global financial crisis that is expected to push 46 million more people into extreme poverty. The crisis has intensified the struggle for resources—both across and within countries—fueling the resurgence of fear and armed conflicts and endangering progress on women’s rights. Despite more commitments, including at the highest levels, the gaps on the ground are vast: violence against women continues, and impunity remains the norm, rather than the exception.

This year on International Women’s Day the UN system is mobilizing to sustain the momentum of the Secretary-General’s Campaign, focused on *global advocacy, national and regional partnerships, and UN leadership*. This year is also the 30th anniversary of CEDAW, and we need a renewed push for universal ratification without reservations if the international community is to fulfill the MDGs and put an end to violence against women and girls.

UNIFEM’s Say NO to Violence against Women campaign echoed the UN call to action, mobilizing over 5 million signatures to demand governments take action. Nearly 70 governments, including 30 Heads of State, signed on. Some have already taken needed action—withdrawing CEDAW reservations, acceding to its Optional Protocol, funding national action plans against gender-based violence and training judiciaries and police to provide needed support. This year we are taking the campaign to the regions, working with inter-agency teams in Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, demanding women’s right to a life free of violence.