

Message from Mary Robinson

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Secretary-General of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance This year the focus of International Women's Day is «Women and Peace». This is a most appropriate topic: girls and women are not only frequently the tragic victims of conflicts, but their role as peace makers and conflict preventers is often underestimated or brushed aside. The international community should wake up to the rich contribution that women have to make to peace.

I am heartened, as all women will be, by the first convictions of rape and enslavement as crimes against humanity by the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. These convictions send a message that systematic sexual violence, degradation and enslavement of girls and women during conflict can no longer be carried out with impunity. They serve as a reminder that when individuals sink this low in the dehumanisation of their victims, the international community will stand firm to assert the values of humanity.

The victims were targeted because they were women and because they were Moslems. Many women face multiple forms of discrimination because of their gender and because they belong to a particular race, ethnicity, descent, colour or religion. This year the world has a unique opportunity to take concrete measures to combat these forms of discrimination. From 31 August to 7 September the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance will be held in Durban, South Africa. One of the key issues before the Conference will be the gender dimension of racism.

On this International Women's Day, I call on all States to accept the international framework for the fight against discrimination. I call on them to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and its Optional Protocol as well as the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

I call on them to review their laws and policies and repeal those that disproportionately affect women, particularly those from disadvantaged racial groups. I call upon them to pay attention to the specific needs of certain groups, such as indigenous women, women refugees, women migrants, and trafficked women. I urge them to develop education and training programmes to eliminate discriminatory attitudes. I ask them to ensure that remedies and complaint mechanisms are available to women of racially disadvantaged communities.

Many women suffer in silence. We should break the cycle of suffering and silence. We

should move forward and assert the value of human diversity. We should be prepared to seriously address women's demand for justice.