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HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS POINTS TO CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN PROMOTING WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Ensuring gender equality in all countries remains an enormous challenge, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour said as she marked International Women's Day on 8 March.

Despite significant achievements in the quest for women's equality, in particular since the entry into force of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), now accepted by 181 States, "our work is far from complete", the High Commissioner said. "There are many laws that continue to discriminate against women – sometimes explicitly and other times because their apparent neutrality results in discrimination against women in practice. And every day, millions of women and girls suffer from unacceptable violence, much of which is directed at them because of their sex".

The High Commissioner said that on this International Women's Day there was, nonetheless, some reason to celebrate.

"It is heartening that as a result of recent polls in different countries, the world now has a dozen women elected to the highest political offices", she said. "The election of women as heads of state or government is extremely significant for their countries and resonates powerfully around the world".

These positive developments, however, stand in sharp contrast to the fact that countless women around the world continue to face discrimination rooted in social structures and cultural traditions and attitudes, and that problems also persist in ensuring women's political participation, High Commissioner continued. There are still countries where women are denied the right to vote, and only a few countries have achieved the 30 per cent benchmark of women parliamentarians deemed essential for women to truly have a significant impact on the work of Parliament. And even though reaching that figure was essential, she added, from a human rights perspective of full equality the goal should be 50 per cent women parliamentarians.

“I am also concerned that women do not play an equal role in decision-making in many spheres beyond national parliaments”, the High Commissioner continued. “I entirely support the Secretary-General’s commitment to improving the status of women in the United Nations Secretariat, with the ultimate goal of reaching a gender balance of 50 per cent at managerial and decision-making levels.” OHCHR is close to achieving this goal.

The High Commissioner recalled that women’s rights are human rights and that during this period of transformation and renewed commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights, women’s rights must be prioritized.

She made clear that OHCHR will continue to adopt gender perspectives and gender analysis in all its activities, adding that with a portion of the significantly increased resources allocated to the Office by the General Assembly in 2005, she is establishing a Women’s Human Rights and Gender Unit.

She said that at the 2005 World Summit, political leaders renewed their commitment to human rights, and specifically recognized the need to pay special attention to the human rights of women by bringing gender perspectives into the human rights agenda. The High Commissioner emphasized that “we must seize the opportunity to focus our efforts on ensuring that women’s human rights have a central role in the human rights organs of the United Nations. The women of the world deserve nothing less”.