

Secretary-General's message to women of the Commonwealth International Women's Day, 8th March 2008

Today, on International Women's Day, the theme of *Financing for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women* sends out clear messages on good economics and good mathematics.

Women count. Count them up, and you reach 3 billion – half the people on this planet. Dis-count them, and you reach the state we're in, where half of the people on this planet bear considerably more than half of its problems.

Gender inequality is bad economics. Restricting women's access to work and education is extremely expensive. In Asia and the Pacific, the UN estimates this loss at over \$40 billion a year, for restrictions on women's employment alone. Add to that the financial losses because girls are kept out of school, and the picture deteriorates further. This is the situation in one region, so we can do our own calculations across the Commonwealth and the globe. So again, we discount women to our cost.

So what is being done? As I said to our Commonwealth Ministers for Women's Affairs when they met in Kampala last June, more aid is supposed to be flowing in since the Paris Declaration. But how much is actually in the pot – and more importantly, is it getting to women?

Women continue to be missed out. The World Bank has calculated that in 2006 the global funding shortfall for the work needed to meet the 3rd Millennium Development Goal - to promote gender equality and empower women - was in the region of \$30 billion. By 2015, that figure will have more than doubled. We are hearing the same message again and again, and today in New York we heard it loud and clear, at the end of the 52nd Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

Halfway towards the deadline for delivering on the global commitments enshrined in those Millennium Development Goals, it has become apparent that our approach towards eliminating inequalities needs an audit.

Two-thirds of those below the poverty line worldwide are women, as are two-thirds of those who can't read or write. In education, two-thirds of the children around the world who don't go to school are girls, while half a million women die every year in pregnancy or childbirth. Violence against women remains a scourge within nations; women continue to be under-represented in the democratic process; and the face of HIV/AIDS is now that of a young African woman.

The world needs to take stock – and rethink. The Commonwealth has already done so.

In October 2007 and November 2007, Commonwealth Finance Ministers (meeting in Guyana) and Commonwealth Heads of Government (meeting in

Kampala) took a stand. They publicly endorsed the critical importance of financing gender equality and women's empowerment to achieve economic growth, development, peace and democracy. Within an extensive work programme under our Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015, we will follow these through, not least with technical assistance and information sharing on 'Gender responsive budgets'. Meanwhile we will build on our own pioneering Commonwealth work done to track the way money allotted to gender equality is actually spent. That work begins 'at home', as we keep watch on the way that we build gender considerations into so many of our projects to promote democracy and development.

The world must summon both the political and the financial will to honour its commitment to deliver real progress on improving the lives of women and girls around the globe.

Greetings to all of you on International Women's Day, 2008.

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