

## Welcome Note for International Women's Day

(Monday) 10 March 2008 at the U Thant Hall

Your Excellencies, Dear Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Be most welcome to UNU today on such a wonderful occasion – the International Women's Day (IWD). This day is annually commemorated by the United Nations and it is marked around the world. In many countries this is a national holiday, symbolizing adoration for the role of women and mothers. The IWD commemorates ordinary women as promoters of peace, justice and development.

This day is historically rooted in the centuries-old struggle of women for gender equality, for their right to participate in society on an equal level with men. The idea of an IWD first arose in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was a period of expansion and turbulence, booming population growth and radical ideologies.

**A brief chronology:** On 28 February 1909 the first National Woman's Day was observed across the USA after a declaration by the Socialist Party. Women in the USA continued to celebrate it on the last Sunday of February through 1913. In 1910 the Socialist International meeting in Copenhagen established the International Women's Day (IWD) to honor the movement for women's rights and to help achieving universal respect for women. The proposal was greeted with unanimous approval by a conference of over 100 women from 17 countries, including the first three women-parliamentarians in history from Finland. After the decision in Copenhagen, on 19 March 1911, the IWD was held for the first time in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland. Altogether more than a million women and men attended the rallies. In addition to the right to vote and to hold public office, they demanded the right to work, the right to education and an end of labor discrimination.

On 25 March 1911 the Triangle Fire in New York City took the lives of more than 140 working girls, most of them Italian and Jewish immigrants. This tragic event had a significant impact on labor legislation in the USA, and the working conditions leading up to the disaster were invoked during subsequent observances of IWD.

In 1913 as part of the peace movement growing on the eve of World War I, Russian women observed their first IWD on the last Sunday in February 1913. Elsewhere in Europe, on or around 8 March of the following year 1914, women held rallies either to protest against the war or to express solidarity with their sisters. In 1917 with 2 million Russian soldiers dead in the war, Russian women again chose the last Sunday in February to rally for 'bread and peace'. Political leaders opposed the timing of the demonstration, but the women went on anyway. Four days later the Czar was forced to abdicate and the provisional Government granted women the right to vote. That historic Sunday fell on 23 February on the Julian calendar then in use in Russia, but on 8 March on the Gregorian calendar in use elsewhere.

**Role of the UN:** The growing international women's movement has been strengthened by four global UN women's conferences that have helped make the commemoration a rallying point for coordinated efforts to demand women's rights and participation in the political and economic process. Increasingly, IWD is a time to reflect on progress made, to call for change and to celebrate acts of courage and determination by ordinary women who have played an extraordinary role in the history of women's rights.

Few causes promoted by the UN have generated more intense and widespread support than the campaign to promote and protect the equal rights of women. The UN Charter is the first international agreement to proclaim gender equality as a fundamental human right. Since 1945 the Organization created a historic legacy of internationally agreed strategies, standards, programmes and goals to advance the status of women

worldwide. Over the years, the UN actions for the advancement of women has taken four clear directions: promotion of legal measures; mobilization of public opinion and international action; training and research, including the compilation of gender desegregated statistics; and direct assistance to disadvantaged groups. Today a central organizing principle of the work of the UN is that no enduring solution to society's most threatening social, economic and political problems can be found without the full participation, and the full empowerment, of the world's women.

**TICAD IV:** In Africa there is a saying: "A man protects the village, a woman protects the humanity". I would like to inform our audience today that we have been very pleased to learn that the Japanese Ministry of Education on the occasion of the TICAD IV is organizing an important and timely conference, aimed to bring to the forefront the importance of enabling girl's access to education. This follows up from the Millennium Development Goal 3 - eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education. The access to high education for African girls is regarded as a high policy priority within the broader African development strategies.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me once again welcome you most warmly to UNU today and wish you all to have a fruitful discussion on the topic 'Investing in Women and Girls' and have a pleasant time in the House of the UN University.

Thank you very much.