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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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MESSAGE ON INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

8 March 2012

Gender equality and the empowerment of women are gaining ground worldwide. There are more women Heads of State or Government than ever, and the highest proportion of women serving as Government ministers. Women are exercising ever greater influence in business. More girls are going to school, and are growing up healthier and better equipped to realize their potential.

Despite this momentum, there is a long way to go before women and girls can be said to enjoy the fundamental rights, freedom and dignity that are their birthright and that will guarantee their well-being. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the world's rural areas. Rural women and girls -- to whom this year's International Women's Day is devoted -- make up one quarter of the global population, yet routinely figure at the bottom of every economic, social and political indicator, from income and education to health to participation in decision-making.

Numbering almost half a billion smallholder farmers and landless workers, rural women are a major part of the agricultural labour force. They perform most of the unpaid care work in rural areas. Yet rural women continue to be held back in fulfilling their potential. If rural women had equal access to productive resources, agricultural yields would rise by 4 per cent, strengthening food and nutrition security and relieving as many as 150 million people from hunger. Rural women, if given the chance, could also help end the hidden development tragedy of stunting, which affects almost 200 million children worldwide.

Discriminatory laws and practices affect not just women but entire communities and nations. Countries where women lack land ownership rights or access to credit have significantly more malnourished children. It makes no sense that women farmers receive only 5 per cent of agricultural extension services. Investing in rural women is a smart investment in a nation's development.

The plight of the world's rural women and girls mirrors that of women and girls throughout society – from the persistence of the glass ceiling to pervasive violence at home, at work and in conflict; from the prioritization of sons for education to the hundreds of thousands of women who die each year in the act of giving life for want of basic obstetric care. Even those countries with the best records still maintain disparity in what women and men are paid for the same work, and see continuing under-representation of women in political and business decision-making.

On this International Women's Day, I urge Governments, civil society and the private sector to commit to gender equality and the empowerment of women – as a fundamental human right and a force for the benefit of all. The energy, talent and strength of women and girls represent humankind's most valuable untapped natural resource.