

International Women's Day
Statement from UNDP Administrator Kemal Derviş

8 March

Investing in Women and Girls

On this International Women's Day we recall the fact that across the world, too many women continue to be unseen, under-protected and under-paid members of their societies. In many developing countries women and girls toil in paddy-fields or on barren plots, or take on petty trading on city streets to feed themselves and their families, while too often they are denied access to the land, property, credit or inheritance that could improve their lives.

While women's overall employment rates are increasing, they still perform 60 percent of the informal or unpaid jobs. Although they form the backbone of the agricultural economies of their countries, they often don't reap the benefits of their contribution. In 2005 in Northern Africa, Southern and Western Asia, women held less than 22 percent of paid jobs in the non-agricultural sector. In 2000, women comprised 84 percent of informal workers in Sub-Saharan Africa; in Latin America, 58 percent.

My recent visit to West Africa was a potent reminder of the stark reality of what these international statistics mean to peoples lives: women and girls walking for miles hauling water and firewood to use in their homes, sowing and weeding land they do not own, harvesting and grinding crops - the proceeds of which they are unlikely to see. They are left with little or no time to go to school or to earn enough money to cover their basic needs, let alone turn subsistence living into a profitable cottage industry.

However, with initiative, the right support and the rule of law behind them, many women are creating markets where none existed, turning a profit, and prioritizing investing in the education and health of their families. Investing in women and girls is not only a worthy goal in its own right - it is the one of the fastest and best means of advancing human development for all.

Take the example of Mrs. Sakho from Senegal, who participated in a UNDP-led initiative to boost the productivity and income of poor women farmers by introducing low-cost, mechanized power. With a power source to grind her harvest in a fraction of the time it used to take, Mrs. Sakho's income from processing and selling shea butter has quadrupled and she uses her profits to educate and clothe her children.

In Timor Leste, with skills training, micro-credit and innovative farming techniques, UNDP is helping to turn women's work into women's business and in doing so, helping women affected by the country's recent crisis to reintegrate into their communities. In Paraguay, UNDP is working with microfinance providers to help them better understand the barriers women face in accessing credit and to then meet women's credit needs. So far, approximately 150 micro entrepreneurs have benefited from this particular project, 60 percent of which were women – and every repayment has been on time.

These are the kind of success stories that illustrate why UNDP invests so strongly in women's empowerment and gender equality, recognizing that attention to these issues will strengthen action in all four of our focus areas: poverty reduction, democratic governance, crisis prevention and recovery and environment and energy. UNDP is expanding its gender architecture, having increased the number of gender advisers both in headquarters and in Country Offices to meet the challenge of achieving gender equality results in these areas. UNDP is also improving its system of tracking and accounting for the resources we spend on integrating gender into activities specifically targeted on women's empowerment so that we can better track these investments and identify how and where UNDP's work is having the most impact. UNDP has also instituted a formal accountability system with the establishment of the Gender Steering and Implementation Committee (GSIC), chaired by the UNDP Administrator, to ensure that senior UNDP managers take responsibility for delivering and accounting for gender equality results, and we are stepping up efforts to ensure that we move as close as possible to gender parity at all levels in our organization.

'Investing in women and girls' – the theme of this year's International Women's Day – is about changing the systems and attitudes that discriminate against women and prevent them from fully participating in and benefiting from the economies and societies in which they live. It is about bringing to an end archaic legislation that denies a daughter the right to inherit her father's land and property; creating better policies for affordable, quality childcare and access to clean energy sources and water in the home, so that women can reconcile paid work and family life, and it is about empowering women to participate in public decision-making structures so that they have the means to shape social and economic policies.

Tackling poverty and achieving the Millennium Development Goals and other internationally agreed development goals can only be met when the untapped potential of women in eradicating extreme poverty is recognized and supported.