



**Speech of Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Iraq
Ad Melkert**

At the 100th Celebration of International Women's Day

Baghdad, Tuesday 8 March 2011

General remarks

It is a great honor to join you today on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day – an event that has fast evolved into a global celebration of the economic, political, and social achievements of women past, present, and future.

This 100th year of celebration happily coincides with the first year of existence for UN-Women: In July 2010, the UN General Assembly created UN Women, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. This was a historic step in our joint efforts to accelerate global action for women's empowerment.

In Iraq, the United Nations family, including UN Women, is committed to supporting all efforts, by government and civil society, to improve the situation of girls and women. We note the many achievements made towards the advancement of women in Iraq and I hope we can all reaffirm our collective will to build on these achievements. Let me make four points in particular, inspired by this year's global theme for international day: ***“access and participation of women and girls in education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work”***.

It begins with young girls and women, and their right to education and training

- With education comes also responsibility for making a difference to society, and we are glad to be joined on this platform by women who are politically engaged, and young women who are standing up for their rights as Iraqi citizens.
- Recent events in the region demonstrate the need to address fundamental human rights, including the rights of women, which are of central importance to the stability of societies.

- Where women are educated and empowered, economies are more productive and strong. Where women are fully represented, societies are more likely to achieve peace and stability. Investing in women is therefore investing not only in individuals but also in a better future for all.

1. Education is a basic human right; it is a sustainable solution to many societal problems

- Education is a basic human right, a right that all children and young people should enjoy for their personal development, and that all adults should continue to enjoy, especially those adults whose education has been disrupted by conflict and war.
- Access to education in Iraq remains uneven throughout the country, and specifically disadvantaged are women and children who have been internally displaced or have lived as refugees. Particularly vulnerable are those children growing up in the 10 percent of households headed by a woman
- Since the 1990s, primary school enrollment dropped to 85 percent, with only 70 percent of young girls living in urban areas attending primary school.
- The situation in secondary and higher education is even more worrisome. The net secondary school enrolment ration for girls is only 32 percent; and among the few young people in higher education, only 42 percent are young women.
- The illiteracy rate amongst women at 24 percent is more than double the illiteracy rate amongst men (11 percent).
- Iraq still has an enormous potential to tap, and great opportunities to seize.

2. Education is the cornerstone of women's empowerment

- Access to quality education provides women with a sense of self-worth, and self confidence
- On a societal level, education allows women to take part in the democratic process. In this age of Facebook, Twitter and e-governance, scientific and technological literacy enables participation in social dialogue and political action.
- Educating girls and women is not just a moral imperative. It is also an economic one because one of the things we have learnt over the last few decades of rapid social change is that Investment in women and girls is an investment in the well-being of their families, communities and nations.

- When girls are not educated, a society constrains its productivity and ultimately, its rate of growth. The beneficial impact of an educated woman on infant mortality, fertility, health and productivity is profound. And girls and women who attend school are likely to be better protected from abuse, exploitation and general vulnerability because they have access to life-enhancing information.

3. Equal access to science and technology is needed to ensure equal access to employment

- Today, the United Nations is asking the international community to go beyond just promoting education and training but to also enable equal access to science and technology to provide women better access to decent work.
- Facilitating and promoting access to technology not only spurs economic growth, but will enable women and men, girls and boys to create, receive, share and use information and knowledge for their economic, social, cultural and political development.
- Above all, the Government would be smart to invest resources in girls' and women's access to education, science and technology. The 2011 budget provides a good opportunity to ensure that resources are linked to the stated priorities of the National Development Plan, and that proper expenditure mechanisms are established to deliver on those priorities.
- A Briefing Book, prepared by the Iraq Partners Forum in 2010, contains specific recommendations by the donor community to the Government of Iraq on how to tackle some of the most pressing development challenges in the country. It makes clear that placing gender equality and women's empowerment at the heart of the national development agenda is a key means of enhancing the achievement of the development objectives of the government and people of Iraq.

Schools fit for girls are schools fit for all children

Therefore, make sure that all schools are fit for girls, providing them with a safe and supportive learning environment, remembering that a school fit for girls is also a school fit for boys

Without access and participation in quality education, girls and women are deprived of life-enhancing skills and knowledge and this will negatively impact on their health, their social and psychological wellbeing, and their intellectual development.

To deny girls and women education is to deny them a fundamental human right.

UN and the Access to Education for Girls and Women

I would now like to briefly touch upon what the United Nations family in Iraq is doing to support girls' and women's access to education and to the benefits of Iraq's socio-economic development.

- In Iraq, the United Nations has been active in supporting the Government and the Iraqi people in their efforts to reach the Millennium Development Goals, especially Goals 2 and 3 pertaining to universal primary education and gender equality; as well as other global commitments, such as those under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Commission on the Status of Women.
- All our programmes, from health and education to environment and good governance, are designed to take into account their possible impact men and women, to ensure that through our actions we contribute to gender equality and not inadvertently disadvantage anyone.
- Since 2003, the United Nations has invested \$75 million in education programmes in partnership with the Government of Iraq and our civil society partners.
- The UN agencies such as UNESCO, UNICEF, UN WOMEN, UNFPA, UNDP, WFP, UN HABITAT and WHO are working in partnership with the Ministry of Education, the civil society and the international community to access to education, both formal and non-formal, for girls and women throughout Iraq.
- UNAMI, through its Human Rights Section, monitors regularly the human rights situation of women in Iraq and continues to provide support and advice to the Iraqi authorities on gender-related issues.

In closing, I would like to reiterate that United Nations stands with the people of Iraq in their effort to build a better future for all Iraqis.

We look forward to continuing our partnership with the Government of Iraq and its people to ensure that women and men alike are treated with respect, given equal education opportunities and the life chances which will enable them to contribute to their own countries' future.

Only with knowledge, there will be progress, and only with progress, there will be a better future in Iraq for all women and men alike.