Op-ed: Empowering Rural and Urban Women:  
The time is NOW

An Op-ed by the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Ghana,  
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on the occasion of  
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The world has come a long way in the stride towards gender equality. You and I have come a long way since 1995 when the Fourth World Conference on Women came up with a blueprint for promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment known as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Platform for Action imagines a world where each woman and girl can exercise her freedoms and choices, and realize all her rights, such as to live free from violence, to go to school, to participate in decisions and to earn equal pay for equal work.

The Beijing process was a significant period in the cause for gender equality because it unleashed remarkable political will and worldwide visibility from governments, individuals and civil society and reinforced the activism of women’s movements on a global scale. Conference participants went home with great hope and clear agreement on how to achieve gender equality and women’s empowerment. Ghana for example developed its first action plan for the Implementation of the Beijing platform in 1999; to date some significant progress has been made, especially at the national level with regards to gender equality and women empowerment.

Twenty-three (23) years on, we celebrate progress made, and reflect on the steps we need to make to achieve all the aspirations of the platform for action.

The 2018 International Women’s Day theme: “Time is Now: Rural and urban activists transforming women’s lives”, draws our attention on those who stood or stand strong and determined to transform the lives of women. We are reminded to celebrate those individuals who have made progress possible towards gender equality. We are encouraged to direct our focus on those who keep sounding the message for ensuring gender equality and for a just world. These are gender activists. They are our male and female champions in rural and urban areas in various countries including Ghana who have made gender equality and women’s empowerment their cause and mission in life.

The call to celebrate these activists could not have come at a better time, when we have shifted our gears towards making the promise of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to leave no one behind a reality. It means prioritising the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged people of society and paying attention to those who are excluded and at risk of violence and discrimination. The UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, known as UN Women, recognises for instance that urgent action for rural women is needed to ensure an adequate standard of living, a life free of violence and harmful practices, as well as guarantee full access to land and productive assets, food security and nutrition, decent work, education and health, and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

In Ghana, rural women produce close to 60 per cent of the country’s food and contribute 50 to 70 per cent of the
labour force within the agricultural sector. This notwithstanding, rural women earn only 10 per cent of the income and own about eight per cent of the land; this hinders their ability to access other productive resources. Available evidence suggests that rural women continue to confront gender-based discrimination and barriers to the full recognition and protection of their human rights, such as lack of equal access to education, decision-making opportunities, health care, clean water, and productive resources such as land, finance, markets and technology. In addition, climate change is adding new sources of insecurity and vulnerability to natural disasters and volatility in crops and water. Volatility in food and energy prices is an ongoing challenge. Such sources of insecurity limit not only their own personal prospects, but also the prospects of their nations and our global community.

How do we then unlock their potential? We need to empower women and this means changing policies, harmful norms and laws in order to better protect their rights and expand their opportunities. We need to address the issue of access to and control of resources.

Advocacy for gender equality and women’s empowerment must continue in earnest. It must engage both women and men. And it must target the barriers that women face in both urban and rural contexts. Agents of change and social activists must be empowered with knowledge, data and facts as well as resources to continue the work they have started.

Over the years, we have experienced the power of great activists whose work has stimulated change, who have broadened our perspective on human rights issues and propelled forward practical solutions. As indicated by the UN Secretary General in his statement to mark this year’s IWD, the work of gender activists has indeed borne fruit and today “Gender equality is enshrined in countless laws, and harmful practices like female genital mutilation and child marriage have been outlawed in many countries.”

The United Nations in Ghana salutes all gender activists. We pay tribute to Ghanaian women’s rights activists. And we hail the work of one in particular, Annie Baeta Jiagge, principal drafter of the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, whose campaign for gender equality and contribution is still informing our work today.

It is important to note that advocacy/activism for gender equality that achieves results is not telling women to be like men or to edge out men; it is calling women and men to expand their space so they can freely take on roles based on their capacities, not on the basis of sex.

It is not pitching women against men, it is helping women and men actualise their true potentials. It is about women and men having equal opportunities and resources to contribute towards their own development and the development of their communities and nations.

Why is gender equality and women’s empowerment important? Research evidence has shown that countries with more gender equality have better economic growth. Companies with more women leaders perform better. Peace agreements that include women are more durable. Parliaments with more women enact more legislation on key social issues such as health, education, anti-discrimination and child support. Rural women with the required productive resources and market opportunities would ensure food security. But more importantly “gender equality is a human rights issue, [and] it is also in all our interests: men and boys, women and girls. Gender inequality and discrimination against women harms us all.”

Together, let us work for women’s rights, empowerment and gender equality as we strive to eliminate poverty and promote sustainable development. Equality for women is progress for all! The UN in Ghana therefore calls on everyone to join activists here and around the world to seize the moment of IWD on 8 March: celebrate, take action and transform women’s lives in rural and urban communities. The time is NOW.