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**THE SECRETARY-GENERAL**

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**OP-ED – INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S DAY 2024**

**“INVEST IN WOMEN: ENDING THE PATRIARCHY REQUIRES MONEY ON THE TABLE”**

**8 March 2024**

The fight for women’s rights over the past fifty years is a story of progress.

Women and girls have demolished barriers, dismantled stereotypes and driven progress towards a more just and equal world. Women’s rights were finally recognised as fundamental and universal human rights. Hundreds of millions more girls are in classrooms around the world. And pioneering leaders have smashed glass ceilings across the globe.

But progress is under threat. And full equality remains light years away.

Billions of women and girls face marginalization, injustice and discrimination, as millennia of male domination continue to shape societies. The persistent epidemic of gender-based violence disgraces humanity. Over four million girls are estimated to be at risk of female genital mutilation each year. Discrimination against women and girls remains perfectly legal in much of the world. In some places, that makes it difficult for women to own property, in others, it allows men to rape their wives with impunity.

Meanwhile, global crises are hitting women and girls hardest. Wherever there’s conflict, climate disaster, poverty or hunger, women and girls suffer most. In every region of the world, more women than men go hungry. In both developed and developing countries, a backlash against women’s rights, including their sexual and reproductive rights, is stalling and even reversing progress.

New technologies – which have such potential to dismantle inequalities – too often make matters worse. That can be because of unequal access, algorithms with baked-in bias, or misogynistic violence – from deep fakes to targeted harassment of specific women.

At our current speed, full legal equality for women is some 300 years away; so is the end of child marriage. This rate of change is frankly insulting. Half of humanity can’t wait centuries for their rights. We need equality now. That means accelerating the pace of progress. And that relies on political ambition, and on investment – the theme of this year’s International Women’s Day.

We need public and private investment in programmes to end violence against women, ensure decent work, and drive women’s inclusion and leadership in digital technologies, peacebuilding, climate action, and across all sectors of the economy. We must also urgently support women’s rights organizations fighting against stereotypes, battling to make women’s and girls’ voices heard, and challenging traditions and cultural norms. Currently they receive a paltry 0.1% of international development spending. That must change.

Investment may sound far removed from women’s everyday lives. But it takes investment to give schoolgirls the same opportunities as schoolboys. It takes investment to provide digital education and develop skills. It takes investment to provide the childcare that enables caregivers, who are mainly mothers, to do paid work outside the home. And it takes investment to build inclusive communities and societies with the full participation of women and girls of all backgrounds.

Putting money behind equality is the right thing to do, but it also makes financial sense. Supporting women to enter formal labour markets grows economies, boosts tax revenues and expands opportunities for all.

Securing the investment we need in women and girls requires three things. First, increasing the availability of affordable, long-term finance for sustainable development, and tackling the debt crisis strangling many developing economies. Otherwise, countries simply won’t have the funds to invest in women and girls. We need immediate action to provide breathing space for countries with unbearable debt repayments looming, and to encourage multilateral development banks to leverage far more private finance at affordable costs. Over the long term, we must reform the international financial architecture and make it far more responsive to the needs of developing countries.

Second, countries must prioritise equality for women and girls – recognising that equality is not only a matter of rights but the bedrock of peaceful, prosperous societies. That means governments actively addressing discrimination, spending on programmes to support women and girls, and ensuring policies, budgets and investments respond to their needs.

Third, we need to increase the number of women in leadership positions. Having women in positions of power can help to drive investment in policies and programmes that respond to women and girls’ realities. I am particularly proud that since early in my tenure – and for the first time in history – we have equal numbers of women and men in senior management across the entire United Nations system.

Equality is overdue. Ending the patriarchy requires money on the table – it’s time to cough up.