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Press Release
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**SECRETARY-GENERAL CITES UNITED NATIONS ROLE IN
HIGHLIGHTING EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AS MEANS OF
EMPOWERING WHOLE NATION**

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Following is the text of a statement by Secretary-General Kofi Annan on the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, delivered in Washington, D.C., on 11 March:

Thank you, Mrs. Clinton, for that kind and generous introduction. I am please and honoured to be able to join you here today. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is one of the most remarkable documents of our time. It was born out of one of the most remarkable movements in the history of humankind -- that of equal rights for men and women. As of today, 161 countries have ratified or signed the Convention. In this fiftieth anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there could be no more fitting tribute to the Convention than for the United States to become the 162nd.

The women's movement owes its birth and successes to the extraordinary courage of non-governmental women's groups around the world. Today, these groups are forging a partnership with governments. At the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, that partnership came alive to give us a common plan of action for the empowerment of women. Today, we rededicate ourselves to that plan of action and reaffirm our determination to implement it.

For more than half a century, the United Nations has played a leading and crucial role in helping to set a common standard for measuring how societies advance equality between men and women. It has helped to shift national and international attention to the empowerment of women as means of empowering whole nations.

We have a duty to apply this principle to the United Nations itself. Today, what better proof of our progress could I offer you than to introduce Louise Frechette, who took up her duties last week as the United Nations first ever Deputy Secretary-General. Ms.

Frechette, a distinguished Canadian diplomat already well-known to you, Secretary Albright, brings an impressive degree of experience, expertise, energy and effectiveness to the post.

- 2 - Press Release SG/SM/6483 WOM/1047 12 March 1998

In the past year, we have also welcomed Mary Robinson as High Commissioner for Human Rights, and Elisabeth Rehn as my Special Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Gro Harlem Brundtland will soon take up the reins at the World Health Organization (WHO), which has done more to ensure the welfare of women in the developing world than any other organization in history. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP), the World Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) -- other members of the United Nations family that are so central in building better lives for women -- also all have women at the helm.

While it is crucial to achieve participation by a greater number of women in all that we do, numbers are not the whole answer. Promoting the rights of women is not the responsibility of a few brave and dedicated women - - it is the duty of all of us.

Women and children first used to be phrase that referred to the seats in the lifeboats of any ship. Now it seems all too often to refer to the victims of a country in conflict. We owe it to women everywhere to make it clear that violence against women is not acceptable in any culture; that women's rights are not something to be given or taken away by a government like a subsidy; that the oppression of women -- from discrimination to death -- is the oppression of humanity. At the margins of society and in the face of hunger and disaster, let us make sure that women and children will always come first.

On this International Women's Day, let us spread the message that women's rights are the responsibility of all human kind, that combatting all forms of violence against women is the duty of all humankind, and that achieving the empowerment of women is the advancement of all humankind.

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