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**Press Release**  
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**SECRETARY-GENERAL SAYS IT IS DUTY OF ALL TO BE 'VIGILANT AND ARTICULATE CUSTODIANS' OF WOMEN'S ANTI-DISCRIMINATION CONVENTION**

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Following is the text of Secretary-General Kofi Annan's address on the opening for signature of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which was delivered this afternoon at Headquarters:

We can all take pride in the event we are marking today. I can think of no better way to celebrate this last Human Rights Day of a century which has seen great advances in women's rights, than by adding this important instrument to our tool-kit in ensuring that women really do enjoy those rights.

Since 1893, when New Zealand became the first country in the world to grant women the right to vote, women in all parts of the world have worked steadfastly to secure their equal status and rights under the law and in practice. And from the birth of the United Nations, women have made skilful use of our Organization as a platform to voice their demands for equality and non-discrimination.

Of the United Nations Founder Members in 1945, only 30 allowed women equal voting rights with men, or permitted them to hold public office. Yet already back then, women in Government delegations and in non-governmental organizations recognized the power and potential of this global forum. Their vision ensured that the principle of equal rights for women and men is enshrined in our Charter, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in all the major international conventions and covenants on human rights concluded since.

As women have continued to bring their concerns and aspirations into the international arena, the United Nations has been their constant partner and ally. On 18 December 1979 -- 20 years ago next week -- the General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. This "Women's Bill of

Rights" stands as a milestone. It reflects the principle of universal and indivisible rights shared by all nations, foreign to no culture and common to both genders.

Today, 165 States have ratified or acceded to the Convention, and several more countries are taking active steps towards accepting it.

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\_\_\_\_\_ \* Press Releases SG/SM/7250 and SG/SM/7254 were not issued. The Beijing Platform for Action committed Member States to universal ratification of the Convention by the year 2000. We are not there yet, but we are moving in the right direction.

As the Convention has gained wider support, women have increasingly asserted and exercised their human rights. The international community has recognized that violations of women's rights must be addressed with the same urgency as other human rights concerns. And we have realized that the equality of women must be central to our attempts to address social, economic and political issues right across the board.

Over the past decade, we have achieved further milestones. The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women spelled out actions and measures to prevent and eliminate violence perpetrated against women -- in the family, in the community and by the State -- and to bring the perpetrators to justice. The Vienna Conference on Human Rights reaffirmed the equal status and the human rights of women as an indivisible, inalienable and integral part of universal human rights. The Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing, provided a framework for translating human rights law into concrete actions to achieve gender equality.

And the Statutes of the Tribunals for the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda promised at last to end the culture of impunity surrounding crimes against women in armed conflict. Both Statutes defined rape as a crime against humanity and helped set a universal standard. The Statute of the International Criminal Court adopted last year ensures that its jurisdiction, too, will cover rape and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I see there are not many of us, still, I say gentlemen.

To protect, promote and realize women's human rights is the responsibility of all of us -- wherever we may be, whichever gender we belong to.

In the course of the 20th century, we have made great strides in defining universal norms of gender equality. As we enter the 21st, it is time to implement those norms. The Optional Protocol we have opened for signature today will be an invaluable tool for doing that. In States which have ratified it, women whose rights have been violated will henceforth be able, once they have exhausted national remedies, to seek redress from an

international body -- the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

This is extremely important, for two reasons. First, it places the Convention on the same footing as other human rights treaties. Second, by putting pressure on States parties to fulfil their legal obligations under the Convention, it will promote wider implementation, helping the world move closer to its stated ideal: equality of all human beings. So the unanimous adoption of the Protocol by the General Assembly speaks much louder than words. It tells us that governments are committed to providing women with the necessary legal framework to protect and promote their rights, and the procedures to put them into practice.

Let me therefore congratulate those States that have signed the Protocol this morning. I understand there are 23 of them. Let's give them a hand. I am sure that others will soon follow and that by next June, before the Special Session of the General Assembly on "Beijing Plus Five", we will have the ten ratifications needed for the Protocol to enter into force.

But let me also say that, while international mechanisms are essential, they will always remain subsidiary to national remedies. Indeed, the greatest value of instruments like the one before us today is their influence at the national level. I am convinced that the Optional Protocol will inspire Governments to look closely at the remedies available in their own countries for preventing and redressing violations of the rights of women protected under the Convention. For ultimately, it is action at the national level that will create an environment where women and girls can enjoy all their human rights fully, and where their grievances will be addressed swiftly and seriously.

Madam Chairperson, you have said that the Optional Protocol had many mothers. Today, you place it in the care of all of us, to ensure that it grows into a strong and useful tool in the defence of human rights.

It is the duty of all of us -- individuals, governments, and the international community -- to be vigilant and articulate custodians of this precious instrument. It is the duty of all of us to give hope to those whose rights are violated, to encourage them to fight back, to resist, to bear witness. It is the duty of all of us to speak up on behalf of the rights of women everywhere.

On behalf of the United Nations, I urge the world to take that duty very seriously.

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