

## MESSAGE

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Let me join those who have spoken before me in saying that women's rights are human rights. As the UN declaration on Human Rights asserts, "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" and are "entitled to equality before the law and protection of law." In a world where half of the population is made up of women, the recognition of women's worth and women's equality with men are imperative.

At the core of our continuing efforts to create an enabling environment for sustainable human development is the promotion and protection of human rights. We at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) believe that human rights and sustainable human development are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. We find that development is unsustainable where the rule of law does not exist; where ethnic, religious or sexual discrimination are prevalent; or where majorities of people live in dire poverty. Similarly, human rights are enhanced when gender equality or poverty reduction programmes empower people to become aware of and claim their rights.

The *2002 Global Human Development Report* underscored the importance of democratic governance in protecting human rights and achieving human development. Studies in a range of countries and regions hold weak governance responsible for persistent poverty and lagging development. The important roles

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institutions, rules and political processes are now becoming more apparent in ensuring that human development moves forward, especially since their ineffectiveness causes the most harm to the poor and vulnerable.

Despite the progress made by many countries in building democratic institutions, some democracies remain fragile and their institutions, too weak to ensure effective governance. One of the main preconditions for implementing the goals of the United Nations Millennium Declaration is for countries to have strong judicial systems that uphold and protect the rule of law. And the application of the core characteristics of good governance in the judicial system includes the promotion of gender equality.

One of the examples cited in the 2002 *Global Human Development Report* was the gender bias in judicial proceedings in Uganda. A study of land disputes in Uganda's Kabale District found that gender bias and corruption routinely lead local tribunals to fail to uphold women's land rights in disputes with male relatives over the sale of family land and farms. Officials demanded "informal" payments from elderly widows harassed by male relatives or women who were not consulted by their husbands in the sale of their family land. Unsurprisingly, these women were unable to outbribe their male relatives and in some cases, the land sellers colluded with the members of the male-dominated village councils.

Many developing countries share the same need to strengthen gender sensitivity in the judicial system. Notwithstanding the many achievements of the Philippines in advancing the status of women, the study on *Gender Sensitivity in the Court System* illustrates that much can still be done to eliminate the discrimination against women.

We are pleased to collaborate with the UP Law Center, the UP Center for Women's Studies, the National Commission on

the Role of Filipino Women and the Ford Foundation in today's launch. But for UNDP, this is considered not just a mere launch, rather another step in the right direction for women's advancement. It is our hope that the recommendations cited in this study will enable the members of the judiciary to further mainstream gender in the courts.

I would like to end my message with a gentle reminder to everyone vested with the power to interpret the law and render judgement, that you are also equally vested with the responsibility to ensure that not one person—regardless of race, class or gender—is denied the equal protection of the law.