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INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

**BY
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Every day, we read about women and girls around the world who are victims of heinous violence. From Iraqi women abducted and enslaved by ISIL to Nigerian schoolgirls kidnapped and forced into marriage, these tragedies seem to belong to medieval times.

Too often, women bear the burden of war. All of us have an obligation to do everything in our power to stop this abhorrent violence wherever and whenever it occurs. But this is only part of the story of women in the 21st Century.

I'd like to propose a different headline, a different narrative. While their work may not always make the front pages, women are confronting our most pressing global issues. At great personal risk, they are fighting poverty, discrimination, and violence so that their families, communities, and countries can have better lives.

As Secretary of State, I see the power of women every day in every country that I visit – from Afghanistan, where they are creating opportunities for the next generation, to Liberia, where President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is building the foundation of democracy.

On Friday, the State Department honored 10 such women with the International Women of Courage Award. Our awardees represent only a small fraction of women around the world who work to advance peace, security, and gender equality, but their individual stories of bravery represent the positive impact that empowered women can make everywhere.

In Kosovo, journalist Arbana Xharra wrote a series of investigative reports on religious extremists in her country. Her tireless efforts uncovered links to foreign terrorist organizations and helped us fight against the rise of a radical extremism threatening global peace and prosperity. Her example galvanized a new generation of journalists working in a nascent democracy to stand up to injustice and corruption.

In Syria, the civil war and humanitarian crisis are destabilizing an entire region. Majd Chourbaji has devoted her life to defending human rights and advocating on behalf of detainees. When she was arrested and thrown in jail by the Asad regime for her advocacy work, she turned the tables

by helping women in her prison fight for their own justice and due process. Her efforts led to the release of 83 women prisoners. Now living in Lebanon, she works through Women Now for Development centers to assist Syrian refugee women find economic and social stability by preparing them to participate in peace building efforts at the local and national level.

And in Guinea, women like Marie Claire Tchecola are on the front lines of the fight against Ebola. As an emergency room nurse at Donka Hospital in Guinea's capital, Ms. Tchecola devoted herself to caring for Ebola patients despite the absence of basic protection like gloves. When she became infected, she took precautions to protect other workers and her family from contracting the disease – and when she recovered, she went back to work. Through her leadership in the Ebola Survivors Association of Guinea, she continues to spread awareness about the disease and fight the stigma associated with its survivors.

These three women faced unique circumstances and barriers in different parts of the world. But each of them – as well as the other recipients from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Burma, Central African Republic, Japan, and Pakistan – found a way to stand tall and strong, to become agents of change.

Tapping the power and potential of women is essential to addressing the global challenges we face. The proof is out there. When women and girls have access to education, health care and jobs, their families and communities are more productive and stable. The opposite is true, too: When women are excluded and victimized, societies suffer grievously.

So we will not retreat in the face of those who seek to diminish or banish women and girls to the margins of society. We do not accept rape as a byproduct of conflict. We will not accept the early and forced marriage of girls as a social norm. And we will not forget those who have been or are being held against their will. Instead, we honor them for the courage they show in the face of brutality and intimidation.

On this International Women's Day – and every day – we have a responsibility to stand united and work together in the ongoing struggle for the rights of women and girls worldwide so that they may live full, healthy, and productive lives.

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