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International Women's Day – March 8, 2012

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“Honoring Women in an Age of Participation”

Our Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has noted that “What we are learning around the world is that if women are healthy and educated, their families will flourish. If women are free from violence, their families will flourish. If women have a chance to work and earn as full and equal partners in society, their families will flourish. And when families flourish, communities and nations will flourish.” These words have particular relevance as we celebrate International Women’s Day around the world and as we continue to make strides for women’s progress.

March 8 is International Women’s Day, and it is a wonderful time to celebrate women. Just a few months ago three extraordinary women who have led the fight for human rights and democracy in their home countries won the Nobel Peace Prize. Two of them, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee of Liberia, are from West Africa, and one – Tawakkol Karman – is from Yemen. Their achievement signifies recognition on the world stage of the essential role that women must play in the hard work of building peace and sustainable communities in the 21st century.

Back home in the United States this past December, President Obama released the first-ever U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security, charting a roadmap for how the United States will accelerate and institutionalize efforts across the government to advance women’s participation in preventing conflict and keeping peace. This initiative represents a fundamental change in how the U.S. will approach its diplomatic, military, and development-based support to women in areas of conflict, by ensuring that their perspectives and considerations of gender are woven into the fabric of how the United States approaches peace processes, conflict prevention, the protection of civilians, and humanitarian assistance.

This International Women’s Day, Secretary Clinton and First Lady Michelle Obama will host the 6th annual International Women of Courage Awards, honoring 10 remarkable women from around the world. These women have shown exceptional bravery and leadership in advocating for women’s rights and empowerment, often at great personal risk. Their stories represent just a few of the emerging leaders found in every corner of the world.

Yet, as we rightfully honor achievements, we must also be reminded that International Women’s Day is an opportunity to renew the call for action, investment, and commitment to women’s

equality. We are at a moment of historic opportunity. Secretary Clinton has referred to this era as “the Participation Age”. This is a time where every individual, regardless of gender or other characteristics, is poised to be a contributing and valued member of their society.

Around the world, we are witnessing examples of the Participation Age. In Senegal, however, girls face a real challenge to penetrate the margins of the education system and take advantage of opportunities to access conventional studies, especially in the field of agricultural research, which is so important to food security here. USAID is committed to providing information and guidance that will increase female students’ participation in these scientific careers.

Just today, I represented USAID as we launched a new program to promote Senegalese participation in agricultural research. The program offers 140 academic scholarships (worth \$1.5 million) for programs in the United States ranging from undergraduate studies to doctoral programs. Sixty percent of these scholarships will go to women. The launch comes on the heels of a workshop that will provide recent graduates a better understanding of the economic possibilities in their field and help employers integrate gender issues in their approaches and programs.

The simple fact is that no country can hope to move ahead if it is leaving half of its people behind. Women and girls drive our economies. They build peace and prosperity. Investing in them means investing in global economic progress, political stability, and greater prosperity for everyone—the world over. As we honor them today, let us renew our resolve to work for the cause of equality each and every day of the year.

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