

# Supporting Women's Empowerment

## Recognizing Achievements and Possibilities

By KAREN P. HUGHES



**W**e observe International Women's Day and Women's History Month to recognize that social progress requires the active participation of women in all aspects of civic life and to acknowledge the contribution of women to international peace and security.

Recognizing the achievements of ordinary women who have made transformative changes in their societies is a way to support women's empowerment at the grassroots level.

Public acknowledgement of the importance of women is especially critical in countries where women have second-class status by law and/or practice.

If women cannot participate in the political process, there can be no real democracy. If women are deprived of economic opportunity, development is crippled. If women are not educated, they cannot pass knowledge to their children, and there is no true security for the next generation.

This is why the United States is committed to innovative efforts to improve the political, social and economic standing of women everywhere.

A key component of U.S. efforts to support democracy and freedom worldwide is to help foster the development and efficacy of women as leaders in their countries' political institutions and processes. The United States supports programs aimed at training women around the world in basic leadership and advocacy skills as well as empowering them to run for office.

Poverty often indicates a missed oppor-

tunity for women's participation, as the failure to use human capital curbs economic development. The United States is proud to sponsor innovative partnerships to promote economic opportunities for women. For example, the Women in Technology Program provides women's organizations with the training and tools to offer underprivileged women cutting-edge curricula and training in information technology, professional development and career networking.

The empowerment of women is also key in the fight against HIV/AIDS. This pandemic is destroying precious lives, undermining economies, and threatening to destabilize entire regions. As the number of women and girls living with HIV rapidly grows, the empowerment of women is key to reducing the vulnerability of both women and men to HIV infection.

Trafficking in persons is modern-day slavery, involving victims who are forced,

*Karen P. Hughes, Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, has just led a delegation of government officials and U.S. college and university presidents to Mumbai and New Delhi to expand educational partnerships.*

defrauded or coerced into labor or sexual exploitation. Annually, approximately 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders. Millions more are trafficked within their own countries. Up to 80 percent of transnational victims are women and children. Human trafficking is a global health risk and it fuels the growth of organized crime.

The global observance of International Women's Day reminds all nations that the empowerment of women is irrevocably tied to the safety, security and prosperity of the world. 

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## Women's History Month

In 1981, the U.S. Congress passed a resolution establishing National Women's History Week. In 1987, Congress expanded the week to a month, and every year since then March has been celebrated as Women's History Month.

The 2007 Women's History Month theme is "Generations of women moving history forward." It highlights important events including the 50th anniversary of the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, that helped ignite the Civil Rights Movement and the 30th anniversary of the National Women's Conference in Houston, Texas, that marked a high point in the influence of the women's rights movement on the formation of government policy.

This year's theme expands on that of the Houston conference—"We are here to move history forward"—and celebrates the talent, courage and intelligence of generations of women. Honorees include Congresswoman Martha Wright Griffiths, civil rights advocate Brownie Ledbetter and Brigadier General Rebecca S. Halstead.

Since its founding in 1980, the National Women's History Project (<http://www.nwhp.org/>) has recognized and celebrated the contributions of women to the history and culture of the United States.