Every year on March 8 we observe international women’s day. It is wonderful to see that in over 100 years since women’s day was first observed in 1909, immense progress has been made in furthering the plight of girls and women. Yet, today is also a reminder about the many injustices against women that still prevail in our societies.

Violence and abuse against women is one of the most prominent challenges of our century. It remains a worldwide phenomenon, crossing borders and generations. This is why this year women’s day is dedicated to speaking out against violence against women and girls. In many societies whether one is born a boy or a girl can have a decisive impact on physical well-being, chances of receiving an education and even determine life or death.

In China tens of thousands of baby girls still die every year due to lack of food and medical assistance. Their parents are less likely to give them the same attention and care that boys receive. In India the figures tell a similar story: girls between the age of one and five are 50% more likely to die than boys their age. “Gendercide” still persists in many corners of the world where parents regard a baby girl as an unbearable economic burden. Others practice bride burning to punish women with insufficient dowries or make place for a new wife. Female genital mutilation and cutting affects up to 140 million girls and women. And every minute a woman dies in childbirth.

Worldwide 50 out of 72 million of children not enrolled in primary education are girls. In 47 out of 54 African countries girls have less than a 50 % chance of completing school. As a result, women account for two thirds of people living below the poverty line. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that at any one time there are 12.3 million people engaged in forced labour, including sexual servitude, a majority of which are women.

One of the most effective ways to end both individual suffering and boost economic growth and special development is to invest in education. From the World Bank to Goldman Sachs, many organisations recognise that empowering women and girls is the best way to fight global poverty and extremism. According to Larry Summers, former chief economist of World Bank, “investment in girl’s education may well be the highest return available in the developing world.”

In many poor countries around the world, women not oil or precious metals are the greatest unexploited resource. Women perform 66% of the world’s work and produce 50% of its food, yet they only earn 10% of world’s income and hold 1% property. If women had equal access to agricultural resources 100 to 150 million fewer people would go hungry every year. Women also spend more wisely; studies show that they invest more of their income in education and providing food for the families and communities.

Equal access to education and health services and the chance to become a full member of political and social life is everyone’s right. But gender equality is also a key factor in tackling conflict and economic hardship. Successfully integrating women in society and economy is a litmus test for successful transition of societies around the world. It is an essential ingredient of deep democracy.

We all know how much talent is wasted and the wisdom that is lost when a society refuses to break with inequality. All those engineers and scientists, doctors and dancers *in spe* who were never allowed to live their dreams, are a tragedy for the individual and a loss for society at large.

Educating girls and including women fully in political, social and economic life also has a positive effect on stabilising societies. This is why gender equality needs to feature prominently in the discussions of the post-2015 development framework. Women across the globe stand to benefit from a rights-based approach to gender equality and development. As the figures above demonstrate, so would everyone else.

Long-term stability and development can only be achieved if issues such as violence, inherent discrimination and lack of access to health services and education are addressed. The hundreds of projects and initiatives the EU funds around the world are part of the comprehensive approach we adopt to development and conflict prevention.

We work hard to increase female participation in political and social life, for example by giving ID cards to 2 million Egyptian women. Microfinance projects in African and Asia have provided new livelihoods for thousands, while also changing prejudices against women and girls in society. And thanks to EU investment in new schools and informal education centres in Pakistan, 60% of students enrolled in these institutions are now girls.

Over the last decade the EU supported 100 projects directly targeting violence against women and girls for a total of 80 million Euro, such as the EU Daphne programme that finances civil society universities and local authorities in their daily work to combat violence and support victims.

But even in the developed world there is much progress to be made. Women now earn over 50% of university degrees and graduate top of the class more often than their fellow male students. Yet, only 21% of current Fortune 500 chief executives are women. If women where to participate equally in the workforce in the US, the Eurozone or Japan the GDP will experience double-digit growth.

It is clear then, that empowering girls and women is not just our moral duty, it is a solution to many of the greatest challenges to development and peace we face: from economic growth to reducing global conflict and terrorism everyone stands to benefit from empowering women. This is why we must stand up for the cause of women and girls not just today, but every day.