The African Development Bank will be celebrating International Women’s Day on Thursday, 8 March.

It is an event that is now more than 100 years old. International Women’s Day first began in 1911 when women were fighting for basic rights such as the right to vote, to hold public office and even to hold down a job.

Now the day is held to celebrate the continuing advancement of women and as a reminder that much more change is needed to achieve women’s empowerment and equality.

In Africa, girls still lag behind boys when it comes to schooling. School enrolment stands at only 90 girls for every 100 boys, but the aim is to reach parity by 2015 and that is one of the Millennium Development Goals.

It is therefore fitting that this year’s theme for International Women’s Day is ‘Connecting Girls – Inspiring Futures’. The theme reminds us of the need to provide our daughters and sons with an equal opportunity to fulfill their potential.

In Africa, females are losing out at all levels of education. Gender gaps in secondary and tertiary education are still great. In 2008, the gender parity index in secondary education in sub-Saharan Africa stood at 79, the lowest in the world. By comparison, the North African region, with a gender parity index of 98, is close to parity.

In particular, African girls are outnumbered by boys in science and technology subjects, which offer better job opportunities.

As a result, many young women are excluded from formal employment and instead they are condemned to work the informal sector on low pay or are excluded entirely from paid work, working instead in the home for no pay.

Also girls and women suffer in conflict situations in Africa. Girls are subjected to sexual violence committed by soldiers and other armed groups, by police, by neighbours, by family members and by teachers – by people, in short, who should be protecting girls not harming them. And yet more often than not the perpetrators of these heinous crimes go free.

For many African girls the future is therefore not at all inspiring. A global coalition called the “Girl Effect”, made up of the private sector, charities and research institutions, has powerfully demonstrated the effects of the social and economic system being skewed against young women.

They lack opportunities because they are forced into early marriage, dropping out of school and having early unwanted pregnancies. That is why they fall into a poverty trap; remain ignorant about their rights and opportunities; and are particularly vulnerable to sexual assaults and sexual exploitation and to HIV infection.

By contrast, girls who are socially and economically empowered contribute to GDP and economic growth. And because they are girls they grow into women, who have better chances in the labour market and can avoid poverty. As mothers they are more likely to open doors and opportunities for their daughters. They are more likely to encourage their daughters to marry later and avoid unwanted pregnancies, to finish school and lead empowered lives.

The African Development Bank has many opportunities to support girls directly and indirectly. Many Bank education projects, at all levels and in technical training, now provide boarding spaces to girls and young women. Technical and vocational training projects seek to influence girls to take science and technology and other non-conventional training courses, through better information, better bridging courses, revised curricula that are less focused on boys, and provision of scholarships for science courses.

Indirectly, the Bank contributes to better education through the construction of roads, expanding girls’ horizons also through the provision of electricity and better internet connectivity.

By bringing clean water closer to villages, the Bank’s water and sanitation projects give girls more time to learn and to connect, as it is usually women and girls who are sent to fetch water.

Health projects offer contraception advice and services to help young women avoid unnecessary pregnancies. It is the responsibility of all - governments, parents and development agencies - to work together so that boy and girls have the opportunity to look forward to brilliant futures.