

**Report of the
Fifth South Asia Regional Ministerial Conference
Celebrating Beijing Plus Ten**

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Islamabad, Pakistan**



**United Nations Development Fund for Women
South Asia Regional Office
New Delhi**

UNIFEM is the women's fund at the United Nations. It provides financial and technical assistance to innovative programmes and strategies that promote women's human rights, political participation and economic security. UNIFEM works in partnership with UN organizations, governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and networks to promote gender equality. It links women's issues and concerns to national, regional and global agendas, by fostering collaboration and providing technical expertise on gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment strategies.

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The Fifth South Asia Regional Ministerial Meeting – “Celebrating Beijing Plus Ten”, was as special as the year 2005 itself. A year of milestones for gender equality, it marks the tenth anniversary of the historic Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing; 30 years since the First World Conference on Women at Mexico; and, five years since the Millennium Summit.

Keeping alive the promise of Beijing, this regional review process, which began in 1996, is a collaborative undertaking involving all stakeholders, including Governments, NGOs, the SAARC secretariat, gender experts, key research institutions and UN partners. These review meetings – five, including this one – have provided unique opportunities for developing an overarching framework of greater accountability to women and for a systematic tracking of progress on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) in a sustained manner. Held in collaboration with host governments, the review meetings have a track record of facilitating cross-regional peer learning and sharing of best practices. Promoting introspection, identifying gaps and addressing challenges, they lead to the development of a common South Asian accountability and agenda of priorities for action.

This was the fifth in the series of the biennial regional reviews and it gives me great pleasure to share the journey and the results of this meeting with you through this report.

The levels of success achieved by this meeting were due to several factors. The level of collaboration and commitment by the Government of Pakistan, who so graciously co-hosted the meeting, was exemplary. We could not have achieved a higher level of political commitment, with the Honourable President of Pakistan welcoming the initiative and His Excellency, the Prime Minister, inaugurating it. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the Government of Pakistan’s kind support and to extend my special thanks to Ms. Nilofar Bakhtiar, Advisor to the Prime Minister for Women Development, for her outstanding leadership.

Indeed, without the dedication and commitment of our partners, with whom we are privileged to undertake this journey, this mechanism for gender rights could not be a success. Their generous sharing and unstinting support is a key element for making it so meaningful and sustained and I thank them warmly. For us at UNIFEM South Asia, the occasion was especially noteworthy as UNIFEM Executive Director, Dr. Noeleen Heyzer, could be with us.

Afghanistan’s participation for the first time in this meeting, albeit as observer, made this event very special. The presence of its representatives added value to this conclave

of South Asian Nations and civil society. In addition, the timing of the Meeting was strategic, coming as it did, after the Beijing +10 review and before the review of the MDGs. It provided the perfect opportunity to unpack the Beijing Plus Ten document in the South Asian context, as well as adopt an action



declaration and strategies on crucial gender issues affecting women across countries in the region for the next two years. Practical and doable with actionable plans, the declaration captures the priorities of the South Asia region. Having already been shared in the ECOSOC process, it provides a strategic instrument for highlighting gender concerns at the Millennium Summit in September, when nations come together for the five-year review of the MDGs.

Prior to the regional biennial review and to set the context, UNIFEM offers a comprehensive analytical report, the “Progress of South Asian Women 2005”. This maps the situation and status of women in South Asia, within the parameters of the twelve critical areas of concern identified in the BPFA. The report this year was prepared by the Indian Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST), under the dynamic scholarship of Dr. Ratna Sudarshan. I extend my sincere thanks to her and her expert team for producing an exemplary report.

This Report of the review itself, walks us through the packed three days which saw very generous sharing, vigorous debate and dialogue and indeed great learning. Participants took stock of progress made on the last strategic document (The Bhutan Forward-Moving Strategies), and strategized on areas of concern. While being a continuation of the process of regional sharing and learning, it provided an opportunity to focus on key regional priorities identified at Paro, Bhutan. The Report captures all the three sessions organized on the three issues which had been identified as pivotal for women of South Asia. I take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank the eminent gender advocates who prepared these – The Varied Contours of Violence Against Women by Dr. Radhika Coomaraswamy, the former UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women; Issues of Gender, Livelihoods and Resources by Dr. Govind Kelkar of the IFAD-UNIFEM Gender Mainstreaming Programme; and Women’s Leadership, Effectiveness and Representation by Ms. Khawar Mumtaz of Shirkat Gah. No less dynamic and equally generous, I would also like to acknowledge the contributions of Prof. Savitri Goonesekere, former member of the CEDAW Committee and Ms. Salma Khan, member of the CEDAW Technical Committee, who added great

value and direction to the regional process through their expertise.

The other special feature of this regional meeting was the presence of the elected women representatives from different tiers of governance from some countries of the region, who told their stories of empowerment. We thus hear the voices of Begum Syeda Fatema Shaistha Banu of Bangladesh, Ms. Feroze Begum of India, Ms. Mishri Giri of Nepal and Mrs. Mehnaz Rafi of Pakistan, within the covers of this Report - sharing how they transformed power relations in order to create a new framework for the political empowerment of women in their respective countries.

The Report provides a one-stop resource for diverse learnings and good practices in the region, which were so generously shared by distinguished officials and experts. Mr. Kesang Wangdi, Director SAARC, shared information on the upcoming SAARC Gender Data Base, a joint undertaking of the SAARC Secretariat and UNIFEM to meet the challenges of inadequate, reliable and relevant sex disaggregated data and the need for a mechanism to statistically monitor progress. Information on how the media and ICT can be harnessed for the advancement of women was provided by Ms. Bandana Rana of Sancharika Samuha. Valuable information on using monitoring mechanisms and tools was provided by Dr. S.K. Nath, Additional Director General in the Ministry of Statistics in India, who focused on monitoring the MDGs; Prof. Mahmuda Islam of Women for Women, Bangladesh, on engendering the PRSPs and Mr. Shyam Sunder Sharma, Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Women, Children & Social Welfare, HMG/N, on making the linkages between the BPfA, CEDAW and the MDGS. I take this opportunity to gratefully acknowledge their contributions and express my appreciation.

Providing an account of the progress made by member countries vis-à-vis implementation of the BPfA, the Report provides a source of updated information with regard to the advancement of women in South Asia. Recording the rich deliberations, it traces the journey of presentations, discussions and recommendations, which ended in the formulation and adoption, of the 'Islamabad Declaration: Review and Future Action'. It delineates a road-map for the journey ahead, as also enriching and influencing ongoing global processes.

This Report provides an excellent updated resource on gender equality and its journey in the region. Cutting edge gender concerns in the region have been culled and time-bound commitments made. Violence against women, the economic and political empowerment of women, disaster preparedness and management, and health and education identified as priorities, as well as specific actions to address

these. Also, the need for developing and strengthening institutional mechanisms for gender equity and equality has been articulated.

The need of the hour is to unlock the commitments and focus on resolute implementation, accelerating progress and expanding its reach. Though not an easy task, the political will and vision of leaders of South Asian countries in tandem with the dynamism of civil society and the women's movement, provide enabling influences. We need to sustain and build on the current momentum.

We hope this report will be widely disseminated, reaching out to a much larger audience. Not only is this another milestone in South Asia's journey, but also at present, a stepping stone for gender equality and gender justice.

I take this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation to Ms. Nilofer Bakhtiar, Adviser to the Prime Minister, Ministry of Women's Development, Government of Pakistan (GoP), and to Mr. Suhail Safdar, Secretary of the Ministry of Women Development, (GoP). Without their partnership and support, the meeting could not have achieved the success it did.

I would like to thank all the members of the UNIFEM South Asia Regional Office, for their wonderful teamwork and tireless efforts. I would especially like to acknowledge the key role played by Ms. Firoza Mehrotra, Ms. Gitanjali Singh and Ms. Mariam Mehdi. I thank Ms. Suneeta Dhar and Ms. Sangeeta Thapa for their support. My grateful thanks to the UNIFEM team of Ms. Anuradha Chandran, Mr. Chandrashekhar Iyer, Ms. Kalpana Gulati and Ms. Chinamma Varghese for providing logistical support of a very high order. I extend my heartfelt thanks to Ms. Yasmin Zaidi, the Rapporteur of this Regional Conference, for taking the responsibility of putting together this comprehensive report and Ms. Josefina Oraa for editing this report.



Chandni Joshi

Regional Programme Director

31st October 2005

The Fifth South Asia Regional Ministerial Conference – ‘Celebrating Beijing Plus Ten’ was held in collaboration with the Government of Pakistan from May 3-5, 2005 at Islamabad, Pakistan.

The Inaugural Session took place at the Convention Center in Islamabad. The Honourable Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Shaukat Aziz, inaugurated the meeting. It was addressed by Mr Lyonpo Chenkyab Dorji, SAARC Secretary-General, Dr. Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Director, United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and Ms. Nilofar Bakhtiar, Adviser to the Prime Minister, Women Development. Ms. Chandni Joshi, Regional Programme Director, UNIFEM South Asia Regional Office and Mr. Suhail Safdar, Acting Secretary, Ministry of Women Development, Government of Pakistan, were also present on the dais.

H.E Ms. Nilofar Bakhtiar, Adviser to the Prime Minister on Women Development, welcomed the delegates and thanked all the Honourable Ministers from the region, the SAARC Secretary-General and participants who were representing their countries and organizations at this conference. She expressed her gratitude to Dr. Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Director of UNIFEM, and Ms. Chandni Joshi for their relentless support and assistance for the cause of the women and for UNIFEM being always at the forefront as far as women’s issues are concerned. She thanked and appreciated the Honourable Prime Minister of Pakistan for being a true champion of the cause of women. She noted that plans and policies can be made but, without sincere commitment by the leadership of the country, no practical implementation can take place. This commitment was forthcoming from both the Prime Minister and the President of Pakistan whom she characterised as ‘gender-sensitive men’.

Ms. Nilofar Bakhtiar remarked that the Conference would be reviewing, sharing and assessing the achievements since Beijing 1995, as well as taking into account the constraints and challenges faced. The Conference was also a celebration of the contributions women are making in every aspect of life - in the home, on the job, in the community, as mothers, as wives, as sisters, as daughters, as learners, as workers, as citizen and as leaders. Women are nurses, teachers, parliamentarians, leaders, government officers, development professionals, journalists, among many other roles. They are not silent spectators but are the voices of the people.

Noting that South Asia is home to more than one-third of humanity, half of which is represented by women, Ms. Bakhtiar lamented that the opportunities afforded to women as individuals for their own development and progress are inadequate. Grounded in poverty, and controlled by patriarchy, women have little ownership of property and other economic resources, including their

own labour, mobility, access to education and information. Noting that all the countries present have taken many initiatives to change the lives of their women, much more needs to be done.



She highlighted some of the progress made by Pakistan in the social, political and economic empowerment of women, especially where the Ministry of Women Development has played a key role in being the national focal machinery which has acted as a lobbyist, catalyst and promoter of the cause of women within the entire government structure and beyond. Some of the achievements included representation of women in all tiers of government, in politics and in positions of decision-making. Legislations have been enacted and amended to reflect women’s rights such as the Citizenship Act, the ILO 100 on equal remuneration of women and men, Control of Human Trafficking Ordinance, the Honour Killing Bill, etc. Several mechanisms were set up, such as the National Commission on Status of Women, the Ministry of Women Development dedicated solely to women’s advancement, the Gender Reform Action Plans’ (GRAPs) wide-ranging reforms to engender the governance structure at the federal and provincial levels, Crisis Centers, Complaint Cells for Women at police stations to address violence against women. For economic advancement, the initiatives taken include Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry Micro-credit programmes, the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund created for poor rural and urban communities and the National Fund for the Advancement of Rural Women. In the health sector, there is a Women’s Health Project which focuses on improving health, nutrition and social status of women and girls through the development of women-friendly health system in twenty district of Pakistan and, the Tawana Pakistan (School Nutrition Project) launched for girls in the age group of 5-12 years in 5300 schools in the 29 poorest rural districts of Pakistan.

In conclusion, the Advisor noted that Pakistan, like other developing countries, faced formidable challenges in the

full realisation of the objectives of the Beijing Conference and, much remains to be done towards gender equality, development and peace.

H.E. Mr. Lyonpo Chenkyab Dorji, Secretary-General of SAARC, commended the Government of Pakistan and the UNIFEM Regional Office for South Asia for the excellent arrangements made to host this important event in Islamabad. He appreciated, in particular, the presence of His Excellency, Mr. Shaukat Aziz, Prime Minister of Pakistan, as it signifies the importance of this conference and is a reflection of the commitment that he and his country attach to gender mainstreaming and the empowerment of women. The Secretary-General congratulated the South



Asian Governments and the women's movements for enabling this unique, transparent accountability mechanism of review, peer learning and setting-out a plan of action for gender equality and women's rights for the next two years. The presence of Honourable Ministers and high-level decision-makers was an expression of their dedication and commitment towards women's issues, in general, and the Beijing Platform for Action, in particular.

Ten years after Beijing, in spite of the high priority accorded to women's issues, they continue to lag behind men for various reasons and are deprived of the options and opportunities to become equal partners in the development process. The vast majority continue to be exploited and dependent on men for survival. They are often deprived of their legitimate rights in their homes, schools, workplaces, societies and communities, at large. It is, therefore, important to closely monitor and review the progress achieved in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

The Secretary-General noted that since the inception of the regional cooperation in South Asia, SAARC has taken many initiatives towards addressing issues concerning women's empowerment. These issues have been included in the SAARC Integrated Programme of Action (SIPA) since 1986. Parallel to this official-level pursuit, political-level consultations have also been held to advance the cause of women. Four Ministerial Conferences have been held

on women's issues. Similarly, at the highest political level, the leaders have continued to stress on issues affecting women. The Declarations of the successive SAARC Summits have emphasized on the need to pay focused attention to these issues.

The Eleventh Summit in Kathmandu in 2002 is regarded as the regional breakthrough in addressing the plight of women with the signing of two landmark Conventions – The SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution and, The Convention on Regional Arrangements for the promotion of Child Welfare in South Asia. These Conventions bring into sharp focus the need for concerted regional cooperation to secure the rights of women and children. They express the collective resolve of the governments of South Asia to treat trafficking in women and children for commercial sexual exploitation as a criminal offence of a serious nature and to place the child at the centre of national and regional programmes of the member-states. These Conventions await ratification by all Member-States. The Eleventh Summit also directed the formation of the SAARC Autonomous Women's Advocacy Group (SAWAG) from the Member-States to prepare and present a broad spectrum of gender issues to further uplift the social status of women and children in the region, and the Summit expressed its resolve to accord the highest priority to promoting social development through specific and targeted programmes. They also directed that necessary measures be taken to ensure that women achieve development to their full potential.

Another important document that would contribute towards the advancement of women in the region is the SAARC Social Charter, adopted at the Twelfth Summit in January 2004. The Charter, among other things, brings to the fore a regional dimension of action aimed at empowering women.

The Secretary-General commended UNIFEM for the various initiatives taken to advance the cause of women around the world and, particularly appreciated the efforts of Ms. Chandni Joshi, Regional Programme Director and her able team for their central role in guiding the SAARC region towards the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. The signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with UNIFEM in December 2001 was a welcome boost to the rich social agenda developed by SAARC over the years. The MoU aims to help member-countries in their efforts to achieve the goals of gender equality in terms of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Beijing Plus Five Outcome Document. It also provides a mechanism for regional cooperation and collaboration and promotes mutual learning and cross-fertilization.

The Secretary-General reiterated that the SAARC Secretariat is committed to continue working towards supporting and sustaining processes leading to the

achievement of gender equality. It has already set in motion the development of a SAARC gender database in collaboration with the UNIFEM South Asia Regional Office to assist Governments and civil society of the region and is linking the Beijing Platform for Action, CEDAW and the MDG processes for the achievement of the common goal of gender equality and women's empowerment. Concluding, he reiterated that countries have to accelerate implementation and take steps to ensure greater accountability.

Dr. Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Director, United Nations Development Fund for Women, said that it was a great privilege and honour for her to attend the Fifth South Asia Regional Ministerial Conference since Beijing. She extended her special gratitude to the Government of Pakistan for inviting her and for co-hosting this meeting with UNIFEM. In particular, she thanked the Advisor to the Prime Minister, Women Development, Ms. Nilofar Bakhtiar, for her outstanding leadership.

Dr. Noeleen Heyzer noted that this conference is one of the several important events in the year 2005, which marks both the 10th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 and the 5th anniversary of the Millennium Summit in 2000. As such, it provides an opportunity to celebrate the progress, not only over the 10 years since the Beijing Conference, but over the 30 years since the first World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975 and to identify the major challenges that we still confront.



Recounting the many achievements to date, Dr. Heyzer noted that all governments in South Asia have ratified CEDAW, laws and constitutions are being reviewed and amended to address discrimination against women, national machineries have been set up, and all countries have adopted national plans for action for gender equality. Laws for women's economic security, against domestic violence, on gender-sensitive laws and policies on HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment and care are being developed and adopted. South Asia is also exemplary in its systematic tracking of progress on the implementation of commitments, primarily through the biennial regional

review process. Most importantly, this regional review process is a collaborative undertaking involving all stakeholders, including governments, NGOs, the SAARC Secretariat, gender experts, key regional institutions and UN partners. Jointly hosted by regional governments and UNIFEM, they indicate commitment at the highest levels towards fully implementing the Beijing Platform for Action in South Asia.

Dr. Heyzer regretted that even so, progress has been too slow. Thirty years after the beginning of the Decade on Women, and ten years after Beijing, it is still a woman's face we see when we speak of poverty, of HIV/AIDS, of violent conflict and social upheaval, of trafficking in human beings. Laws and policy frameworks only go so far. For programmes promoting the empowerment of women and gender justice to succeed, they must necessarily be grounded in effective mechanisms of accountability to women. Too often, women describe how their experiences are not part of the policy discussion, yet, it is well-known that the most effective policy approaches come from listening to those who have experienced such problems first hand, who can provide needed perspectives, improve understanding and offer creative solutions so that resources may be used creatively.

Since Beijing, the world has seen dramatic economic changes, impacting the ability of countries to achieve the Beijing Platform for Action and the MDGs. Globalization – including trade liberalization, communications technologies, decentralization and migration – offers many potential benefits, but not to all. Inequalities have widened between rich and poor, men and women. Women are increasingly clustered in informal, low-wage employment, underrepresented in economic decision-making and denied equal access to resources such as property and inheritance rights, limiting their ability to benefit from globalization. Too often, this results in loss of livelihoods and increased vulnerability to violence, HIV/AIDS, unsafe migration and trafficking.

Cuts in government expenditure resulting from economic restructuring are also increasingly transferring the costs of adjustment to women, who are underrepresented in political decision-making. In the absence of a strong accountability framework, the impact of affirmative action policies to address this is limited. Further, harmful and discriminatory practices rooted in deep-seated cultural values and customary practices continue to perpetuate gender inequalities and women's exclusion from mainstream social, economic and political activities.

The four panels around which this meeting is organised focus on the pivotal issues for women of South Asia, identified as priorities at the previous review in Bhutan – including women's livelihoods, violence against women, HIV/AIDS, and women's political participation, as well as

the importance of implementing and accountability mechanisms. Dr. Noeleen Heyzer urged the meeting to focus on moving from commitments and words into action by identifying a few areas for action between now and the next meeting in two years, such as: a focus on removing all existing laws that discriminate against women, on building the capacities of institutions to deliver, on investing in women's organizing and building partnerships with men to strengthen gender advocates at all levels. She felt that this forum should be institutionalised so that it becomes the South Asian network of women Ministers and leaders to support each other, to share challenges and solutions to create lives free of violence, poverty and discrimination. There was a need to define a single, clear set of benchmarks for monitoring progress on implementation of gender equality and women's empowerment that includes CEDAW, the Beijing Platform and the MDGs. Gender mainstreaming must be combined with renewed investment in women's human rights.

Adequate resources are needed and she mentioned the assistance provided by UNIFEM to governments on gender-budget, but equally gender-sensitive aid architecture designed by the donor community is needed. The effective strategies for achieving gender equality developed over the past 30 years through efforts to implement CEDAW and the Beijing Platform can be upscaled and utilised in strategies to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs are not just a set of targets and indicators but, rather, a set of principles and commitments that put a priority on achieving a world free of poverty, violence and inequality.

Concluding, Dr. Noeleen Heyzer emphasised that the conference brings alive the energy of the Beijing process and carries forward the Beijing torch of equality, development and peace, indicating again the commitment of countries of the region to the world's women. It demonstrates the special partnership that exists between Governments, the SAARC Secretariat, key regional institutions, UNIFEM and UN partners and women's groups. The need is to now urgently move forward on implementation, accountability and adequate resources to bring about a world in which people live lives that are free of want and free of fear. A world where there is development, security and rights for all. We owe this to the next generation.

The Honourable, Mr. Shaukat Aziz, Prime Minister of Pakistan, welcomed all the distinguished delegates and remarked that he was deeply honoured and privileged to inaugurate the Fifth South Asian Regional Ministerial Meeting to celebrate the Tenth Anniversary of the Beijing Conference. He commended the other South Asian Governments, UNIFEM and Pakistan's Ministry of Women Development for keeping the Beijing torch alive by providing a platform and facilitating countries of the region

to come together to jointly introspect, share and assess their achievements as well as gaps and challenges so that strategies and priorities for the future are chalked out. It was a matter of pride that South Asia is perhaps the only region in the world which is following this practice. The ten year review of Beijing called attention to many areas where women's equalities are still not a reality, given pervasive denial of opportunities to women in accessing resources, low female enrolment, high maternal mortality and lack of equal access under law to land and property.

H.E Mr. Shaukat Aziz stated that there is consensus that empowering women is the most effective tool for development as well as for poverty reduction. Constraints such as ignorance, stereotypical mindsets as well as prejudices hinder progress. The Prime Minister noted that efforts to integrate and advance women's social, political and economic agenda have to consider the social – cultural environment and to build on the positive traditions and customs.



One of the greatest challenges the region faces is the feminization of poverty. Women's work is mostly invisible and not accounted for in national statistics. Globalization has accentuated the problem but it also provides an opportunity, which may be turned into an advantage for women. Globalization and the new regimes of WTO also bring new opportunities and greater access to resources and markets but women's capacity and skills must be enhanced to seize these opportunities. The Government of Pakistan has created two new full-fledged Divisions of Women Development and of the Textile Industry to promote and protect women's concerns. The ultimate goal is to add value in the production chain and link women producers to the local, national and global market.

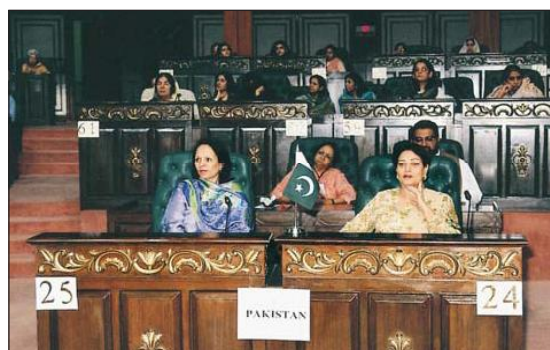
Mr. Shaukat Aziz reiterated his government's commitment to the empowerment of women. In this context, he mentioned some of the initiatives undertaken by the Government of Pakistan in the recent past. Women's political empowerment is an area where Pakistan has set a model in the region. Women's over-all representation

in the legislature is 20%. In absolute numbers, they are 233 out of a total of 1170 legislators. Similarly, women have 33% representation at all tiers of local government. Two women federal Ministers, five women Ministers of States, six women provincial Ministers, ten women Parliamentary Secretaries, twelve women Chairpersons of Standing Committees of the Senate and the National Assembly are indicative of the Government's firm resolve in power-sharing and decision-making. He expected this critical mass of women politicians to come forward and do its agenda-setting for forward-moving strategies in all areas of development.

Recounting some of the other initiatives taken for women's advancement, the Prime Minister reiterated that the Government will do its utmost to work towards zero-

tolerance against violence against women. He noted that considerable progress has been made in the last decade in laying the legal framework to meet the commitments made to women in terms of equality, development and peace. It was now time to take the necessary next steps to improve national and regional accountability and implementation. Women's experiences, perspectives and contributions must play a role in the efforts to increase equality among all peoples, to build a global commitment to human development, human rights and human security as an alternative to violence and inequities.

The inauguration ended on a high note, as the speeches were followed by a colourful ceremony, with children performing the traditional dances of each of the SAARC countries.



Welcoming all the distinguished delegates, Ms. Chandni Joshi expressed special thanks to the Government of Pakistan for co-hosting the biennial meeting and deep appreciation to Ms. Nilofar Bakhtiar, Advisor on Women Development to His Excellency, the Prime Minister of Pakistan.

Remarking that the meeting had a special significance this year as it closes the loop of ten years from Beijing, Ms. Joshi set the context of the meeting and, in particular, the emergence and relevance of the forum, the South Asia Regional Ministerial Conference.

UNIFEM has been working in South Asia since the early 1990s. UNIFEM and the women's movement in South Asia, active since the last three decades, came together with the mutual realisation that each was a natural ally for the other. UNIFEM emerged from the First World Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975, which made a strong call for a specialised UN agency focusing on women's rights and development.

Fast-forward to 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing saw 40,000 women and representatives from almost 200 governments come together, committing themselves to the Beijing Platform for Action which ensued from the conference. The Beijing Fourth World Conference provided women the space to raise their concerns on a very large platform. Various governments got the message that women's issues are not limited to issues of welfare but directly linked to policies relating to different sectors and broader issues and that interventions for women require the highest degree of political will.

UNIFEM South Asia Regional Office has taken the Beijing Platform for Action forward since. After Beijing, UNIFEM South Asia Regional Office has been hosting biennial meetings jointly with governments in South Asia, bringing together all the SAARC countries to talk about their work towards advancing women's rights in the region, despite conflicts within some of the countries and part of the region. A year after Beijing on September 9, 1996, UNIFEM hosted the very first South Asia Regional Ministerial Conference in India.

The whole thrust of the conferences has always been to capture the voices of women and ensure that, more than just global events, these conferences become women's events. The process has been very important because it has brought together all stakeholders, particularly the government, the women's groups, the civil society and various non-government organisations working on the ground. The significance of the forum has also been that the policy-makers, the leaders and the ministers involved in implementing the Beijing Declaration can take stock of ground realities and, at the same time, exchange views with the leaders from other countries. In all these, UNIFEM

acts as a facilitator and identifies emerging issues and catalytic areas for regional cooperation.



Over the years, an identity for the forum has emerged. In the first conference in Delhi, meeting modalities

were discussed, including frequency and the agenda, among others. The way the forum has evolved can be traced through the Outcome Declarations at the end of each meeting. The first Declaration (1996) referred to a broad vision & scenario but the Kathmandu Declaration (1998) from the second meeting reflected the emerging partnership between governments and NGOs, and prioritisation of the region's issues. Questions were raised about how to take the agenda forward, e.g. identifying the research to be done, the kind of institutional mechanisms needed for follow up, etc. The third meeting in Male (2000) came at a very critical juncture where the human rights of women were officially being recognised and articulated in progressive language. The Paro Declaration (2003) outlined the way forward thus, aptly called the Paro Forward-Moving Strategies. There were three areas which came out of the Declaration, with more focus given to research initiatives.

On reflection, the South Asia Regional Ministerial Conference is distinctly different from other fora for women's concerns, primarily because the dynamics are different: the agenda is very much that of the participants'; the process has been built and sustained over time; and the momentum and direction are generated from within the forum and not externally imposed. These are probably the reasons why the Beijing torch has continued aflame in South Asia to date.

In all development debates, one hears about lack of political will and the need for appropriate accountability mechanisms. In our case, three things characterise the South Asia Regional Ministerial Conference:

- One, it is a very unique forum that has the complete backing of the Governments. Their political will is evident through the presence of Ministers and senior officials and the presentation of an official report on the status of women in the different countries.
- Two, it is an accountability forum where the governments are monitoring their own progress, looking at the gains that have been achieved in the region and identifying the gaps.
- Three, it suggests concrete actions to be taken up.

South Asia's experience was showcased and recognised as a best practice at the CSW meeting in New York in March, 2005. Ms. Joshi informed the meeting that a

documentary, "The Power of Doing", is being made as a testimony to the process that the South Asia Regional Ministerial Conference has gone through. The first 'draft' version of the film was screened in New York at the CSW in March, 2005 and shall also be presented at the Islamabad meeting. Interviews with some of the participants of this meeting shall also be included in the final version of the film.

For every conference, a background document is prepared to review work in the context of the Beijing Platform for Action over a period, and published accordingly as "The Progress of Women in South Asia". For this meeting, three eminent persons have prepared papers on issues that this forum wanted to discuss more substantively: The first paper is by Dr. Govind Kelkar on "Gender, Livelihoods, and Resources". The second paper is by Dr. Radhika Coomaraswamy on "The Varied Contours of Violence in South Asia". The third paper is by Ms. Khawar Mumtaz on "Women's Leadership, Effectiveness and Representation". Women elected representatives from the different tiers of governance in various countries are also present to share their experiences. We have in our midst a Village Committee Representative from Nepal, a Municipal Committee Representative from India, a District Committee Representative from Bangladesh and a Parliamentarian from Pakistan. Additionally, as identified at the meeting in Paris, tools for gender auditing will be presented here by experts.

However, Beijing Plus Ten is not enough. This momentum has to be sustained further and the on-going synergy has to be maintained, if not enriched. If we are serious about equity and equality, then we are really looking for gender justice and, therefore, the process has to go on. UNIFEM South Asia Regional Office will continue to be a catalyst in the process, a trendsetter and a pioneer for women's rights and, it will continue to respond to the continuing challenges in South Asia.

Progress of Women in South Asia

Dr. Ratna M. Sudarshan

Director
Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST), New Delhi, India

The presentation by Dr. Ratna Sudarshan, Director of ISST in New Delhi, was based on the report "Progress of Women in South Asia" which had been prepared by a team of staff and consultants at ISST. The report reviewed the progress of women, with a special focus on some of the key issues that emerged in the context of South Asia, during the last five years.

South Asia has witnessed the trend of globalisation, trade liberalisation and the corresponding changes in the macro-economic policy framework unfold in its midst.

This has been associated with higher rates of migration than in the past and a slower pace of change in social norms. This context – of very rapid change in some aspects and very little change in others, poses a series of challenges as well as opportunities.

Significant Achievements

One of the most significant achievements is the much greater visibility of women at different levels of decision-making and, to a large extent, this has been made possible by reservations and quotas introduced in all countries. At the same time, there has been a remarkable progress at the policy level, which marks the commitment of the various governments: the formulation of national plans for the empowerment of women, the engendering of the census and other data collection mechanisms, gender budget analysis and tools. There have also been a large number of regional agreements which mark a joint commitment towards taking action, for example, the SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution (2002), the Regional Campaign on Violence against Women, the catalysing networks such as the South Asia Forum against Trafficking, South Asian Women Entrepreneurs, Network of Feminist Economists, NGO-SAARC Women for Peace, the Positive Women's Network and other networks. An important initiative that is currently in progress is the development of a gender database for South Asia, which will be located at the SAARC Secretariat. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was also signed between SAARC and UNIFEM.

The governments of the SAARC countries committed themselves to taking action in the twelve priority areas highlighted in the Beijing Platform for Action. The *key issues, initiatives, gaps and challenges* in each of these 12 areas are presented in the following paragraphs.

Women and Poverty

The national poverty lines in South Asia range from 25% to almost 50% of the population. While the data on the gendered incidence of poverty is not very good, there is enough evidence to show that there is feminisation of poverty linked to a combination of macro-policy and technological choices that reinforce pre-existing constraints, reflecting social and cultural norms. Initiatives taken by different countries include attempts to engender macro-economic policy and the PRSP in particular, gender budgeting, formulation of national plans for women's empowerment, and an important intervention across the region, micro-credit. Even so, challenges and gaps remain. There is a need to look at poverty in relation to the linkages between macro-economic policies, environmental policy issues and address gender as a cross-cutting issue. There is a need to continue and

strengthen efforts to improve women's access to productive resources, skill training in new technologies, social protection, and better implementation of the existing programmes of poverty alleviation. Commercial banks should mainstream credit and micro-finance for women. Extensive sex-disaggregated data is essential.

Education and Training for Women

This is an area where there has been significant progress as commitment to education is generally very high, especially at the primary level, as may be gleaned from the increasing enrolment rate. The Maldives and Sri Lanka have reached gender parity in primary enrolment. A number of interesting governmental and non-governmental initiatives have been undertaken, such as incentives to enroll all children especially girls into school, and innovative efforts to eliminate gender stereotyping in



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textbooks and choice of subjects. At the same time, the enrolment of girls is still lower than that of boys and there is a higher drop-out rate of girls particularly between the ages of 11-14 years. There is gender stereotyping in curriculum and subjects, suggesting that the socialisation process that takes place through the education system which reflects societal norms has not changed much. This is a particular challenge because we do not have a common schooling system. Disparity in quality of education is evident from the varied inputs by the public, the private and the non-formal sectors of education, undermining the required universal standards in school education. The quality of education received and the relevance of the curriculum are as important as raising enrolment rates or bringing all girls to school. There is inadequate empirical data for monitoring learning achievement by gender. Inadequate resources and dependence on external aid for education marks the sector.

Women and Health

Women and Health is an area of concern as all South Asian countries, excluding Sri Lanka, are in the high child and adult mortality stratum (World Health Report, 2004). Socio-cultural norms result in early marriage, young motherhood, malnutrition, anaemia, and son-preference. At the same time, lack of sanitation and safe drinking

water and the renewed incidence of infectious diseases aggravate the problem and, within this context, the spread of HIV/AIDS poses a great challenge. Initiatives taken at the policy level include an enabling framework that would increase the infrastructure of health services and the health-seeking behaviour of women. An important and positive development is that violence against women is now being seen as a public health concern. Special attention is being paid to HIV/AIDS across the region, where data suggest that an estimated 37% of those infected are women. Challenges include the need to adopt a rights-based approach and to strengthen women as agents in health related policies, finding effective ways of addressing the impact of violence on their health, as well as meeting the needs of women with disabilities. There is a need for increased facilities and resources for all aspects of women's health, not only those related to reproduction but also those for addressing reproductive morbidities.

Mental health is emerging as an area that requires more investment. The overall public health spending needs to go up significantly if gains are to be made. At the same time, it is important to build up the supportive role of men and boys, to address issues like women's health-seeking behaviour and the impact of violence, among others. Just raising the age at marriage may lead to a reduction in several maternal health issues.

Violence Against Women

Violence against Women (VAW) is the fourth area under the BPF. Initiatives taken to address VAW include some legislative measures to protect women and girls from violence. There is recognition of the physical and mental health outcomes of violence, as well as the economic costs thereof.

Currently, national and regional measures have been taken to counter trafficking. In terms of gaps and challenges, intersectionality or forms of multiple discrimination against women needs to inform policy reforms and the responses towards VAW. There is a need to continue and sustain the campaign for the implementation of CEDAW and the removal of reservations. Data on the incidence of violence needs to improve in order to better strategise for responses. There is a need to set up adequate one-stop crisis centres across countries with trained staff, as well as to increase resources allocated to dealing with violence against women and girls. At the same time, gender-sensitisation to change mind-sets and work with men and boys to address gender-based violence and intergenerational socialisation patterns is required. Community-based gender-sensitive initiatives to build leadership are needed. Countries need to encourage women's economic independence, through

property/ land and inheritance rights, access to credit and economic opportunities, etc., so that women can move away from violent relationships

Women in Armed Conflict

It has been noted that conflict leads to increased sexual violence, prostitution and trafficking. Rape and HIV/AIDS are seen as weapons of war. Conflict affects women's economic security. Women's literacy and education are crucial for them to participate fully in peace-building.

An initiative to further women's role in peace-building is the UNIFEM-organised Round Table on Women and Peace in Kathmandu in 2004. Resolution 1325 adopted by consensus in 2000 by the Security Council addresses the need for social protection of women in conflict situations and tasks the UN system and member states to ensure the integration of gender into all aspects of peace and security work.

Lack of sex-disaggregated data impedes the formulation of appropriate interventions at the right point. There has to be a stronger representation of women's resources, experiences and perspectives in peace-building and peace-making processes, as well as in post-conflict interventions and the protection of women's human rights at every stage of the process. The review also identified the need for gender sensitisation at all levels of policy formulation and implementation of peace and reconstruction efforts, including integrating gender analysis as part of early-warning activities and conflict-prevention measures. Another gap noted is the lack of social protection for affected women, especially with a focus on single women, widowed women and female-headed households

Women and the Economy

In terms of the overall macro-economic picture, there is very little change – or no change in the female activity rate. And, there is no change in female activity rate or ratio of female-earned income to male activity rate or earned income since 2002. Female work force continues to be concentrated in informal, home-based, part-time work and piece-rate contract, but also as unpaid helpers. At the micro-level, groups of women have been able to access new opportunities but, this has not made an impact on the overall situation at the macro-level which does not appear to have changed. Initiatives have been taken to strengthen women's access to resources and to improve income through access and control over land and through networking, e.g. HomeNet South Asia, a network in South Asia, set up for lobbying and advocacy and to develop marketing networks and inputs across the region. Globalisation and trade pose a major challenge to women who are concentrated in certain types of traditional

activities where both market and technology are affected by the changing context. Much more needs to be done for women's skill enhancement and capacity-building, especially in the context of new technologies like ICTs, improving education, access to markets and credit as well as social protection and the provision of a non-discriminatory environment for women. These are all areas in which initiatives have indeed been started but a lot more needs to be done to ensure that the changes that are taking place in the economic context have outcomes for women. This is also an area in which joint and concerted effort is needed by national governments, international governments, voluntary agencies and civil society organisations. Migrant women workers have emerged as a group, that is in need of safety nets and protection of rights, both in the country of origin and the country of employment. Again, the need exists to put in social security mechanisms for women in all kinds of situations.

Women in Power and Decision Making

In South Asia, the visibility of women, particularly at the local-level decision-making bodies, has increased dramatically in the last ten years. This has, of course, been possible because of quotas and reservations, though the policies vary in different countries. There is a need to create quotas at national and international levels, as well as to build upon the visibility that has been created. In order to increase women's role in development decisions and conflict resolution, there is a need to strengthen legal and political literacy. There is also a need to strengthen links between the women's movement and women politicians and, to create and strengthen women's information system for women, who have been elected to different positions. The report notes that gender-sensitive decentralisation of resources would make devolution more effective and meaningful. There is also a need to strengthen the role of men in increasing women's participation in decision-making and to use the media to encourage debate thus, helping in ending stereotyped imagery.

Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women

Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have ministerial-level institutional mechanisms to oversee and monitor implementation of the BPFA and, in all the countries, partnerships with the non-governmental sector have been extremely important in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action. The report notes that while each country has a National Plan of Action, there are gaps and challenges in its implementation and in the setting-up of monitoring systems to encourage implementation of international commitments. National machineries are often under-resourced and marginalised and, there is a need to increase the resources (financial, technical, human

and physical) available to them. Across the twelve areas as in this one, the report emphasises the need for collection and analysis of sex-disaggregated data at the household, community and national levels and for capacity-building within the government as well as with the constituencies. There have been pilot initiatives across the region on gender-budgeting, which now needs to be institutionalised. To strengthen impacts across sectors, duplication and confusion in mandate of agencies has to be avoided.

Human Rights of Women

All countries in the region have been able to report on CEDAW and a number of countries have alternative reports. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have ratified the Optional Protocol while Nepal has signed it. Legislation for women's economic, political and social rights in the region picked up after the signing and reporting on CEDAW but the progress has been slow. The review, modification or withdrawal of reservations and declarations remains a challenge, and compliance with reporting, encouraging alternative reporting and ratification of the Optional Protocol, are outstanding issues. At the national level, there is a need to amend discriminatory legislation and to continue legal reform and advocacy to bring congruence between the constitutional principles of equality and non-discrimination and laws/legal system.

The region needs to strengthen the legal system by engendering the substance of the law and strengthening gender-sensitive implementation and interpretation of laws. The legal system must be accessible, especially for women. The law must be informed by inclusive social analysis and gender-sensitive legal and judicial reform processes. Training of law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, the health care providers, the social service sectors, the media and the elected representatives, is necessary to ensure adequate appreciation of women's human rights. The challenge with regard to changing attitudes and prejudices at the community level (campaigns for raising public awareness on rights, legal literacy, etc.) is to increase public awareness on human rights, women's rights, and encourage greater male involvement and participation.

Women and the Media

The critical role of media in awareness-raising, sensitisation and communication is well-recognised. The report notes that most radio and TV stations in South Asia are government-owned. There has been an increase in women journalists, networks and programmes as also new alternative media forms in which women have been playing a greater role. Community radio is increasingly being explored by communities, sometimes ahead of government permission. The challenge is to continue to

expand the spaces that are available for women within traditional and alternative/ parallel media forms. Training on gender-sensitive reporting and programming is needed, as portrayal of women in stereotyped roles continues. There is also a need to project more positive and empowering aspects of women. Gender-sensitive media laws and codes of conduct, broadcast norms for equitable and realistic representations of women, self-regulatory mechanisms for media and legal protection for women journalists, are the challenges that remain. Media regulatory and monitoring mechanisms at regional and national level are also required.

Women and the Environment

The importance of engendering environmental initiatives is well-recognised and the recent tsunami has brought this need to the forefront. Unfortunately, the region has little experience in this regard and, therefore, there is a need to engender development patterns and policies. The challenge is to acknowledge, preserve and use women's knowledge and expertise in managing resources, to protect the interests of women within local communities and to encourage active participation of men and women in natural resource management, research planning and decision-making at all levels. Gender mainstreaming in the policies and operations of all natural resource management institutions, engendering all environmental agreements, projects and programmes, and sex-disaggregated data on environmental concerns, are gaps identified by the report.

The Girl Child

In spite of the many initiatives taken for improving the status of women and girls in the region, unfortunately, practices like dowry, child marriage, desertion, honour killings, among others, continue to create an environment in which the girl child is particularly vulnerable. There is also evidence of sex-selective abortion and a lower commitment to the education of the girl child in comparison to the boy child. It is also true that changing cultural norms requires, the full co-operation of traditional sources of authority. Rights of the girl child in some countries in the region remain violated in several aspects. Prevailing patriarchal and stereotypical attitude in some countries of South Asia have a negative impact on women's health and nutrition. Girls in the region continue to suffer from malnutrition. Mortality rates of girls under the age of five years remain high. Low enrolment and high drop-out rate of girls from school still prevail in the region. There is a need for an effective machinery to enforce the rights of the girl child, implement the minimum age of marriage, and deal with specific issues that have emerged, like malnutrition. Inadequacy of sex-disaggregated data must be corrected, in order to take

genuine stock of the situation and promote the development of the girl child.

Cross-cutting concerns mentioned in the report emphasise the need, firstly, for linkages across sectors and themes of the 12 areas of concern to figure more strongly in policy, e.g. economic policy and poverty, health and economic implications of violence, etc. Secondly, there is a need to involve men and boys in efforts to improve women's status and level of participation in all areas. Thirdly, the report notes the need to encourage socially-embedded community-based initiatives, without which there is often a backlash that hinders progress. Fourthly, there is a need for the generation and analysis of sex-disaggregated data across

the board and, of course, better implementation of existing programmes.

Looking ahead

The Report concludes that the South Asian context is one, where there are constraints, there are challenges and opportunities, as well as a high level of commitment. The region has seen much progress and faces new challenges. The Report urges that the pace of progress be ensured and that change attempts be socially-embedded through the involvement of the community, including men and boys. In order to achieve the targets of the Beijing Platform for Action, there is also a need to engender the Millennium Development Goals.



Commitments, Action Plans and Challenges

Chaired by H.E. Ms. Zaahiya Zareer
Minister of Gender, Family Development and Social Security
Government of Maldives

Bangladesh

H.E. Khurshid Zahan Haque, Minister, Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, Government of Bangladesh, extended her thanks to UNIFEM for organising the Fifth South Asia Regional Ministerial Conference – "Celebrating Beijing Plus Ten" at Islamabad and to the Government of Pakistan for hosting it. She expressed her appreciation for the forum which provides a unique opportunity for South Asia to reaffirm the commitments made at Beijing.

The Minister noted that the Government of Bangladesh has always been a party to on-going international efforts with a view to ensuring women's advancement. It has actively participated in all four world conferences on women and reiterates its commitment to the fulfillment of the objectives of the conferences. The Government of Bangladesh has also actively participated in the regional meetings and reported on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) in the national context, the most recent being in Bhutan in May, 2003 and in Bangkok in September, 2004.

The Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs was established in 1978 by President Zia-ur-Rahman. Bangladesh ratified the Beijing Platform for Action without any reservation and reported to the UN on the progress of BPFA and the obstacles and challenges faced through various regional and preparatory fora, e.g. First South Asia Regional Ministerial Conference held in New Delhi, India in 1996 and the Second South Asia Regional Ministerial Conference held in Kathmandu, Nepal in 1998. Bangladesh also presented its report to the UN at the Special Session of the UN General Assembly Meeting on Women, 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the Twenty First Century (the Beijing Plus Five Meeting).

The Government of Bangladesh has formulated a National Policy and a National Action Plan for women's advancement. The formulation of a national plan has brought the government and its development partners - NGOs, civil society and women's organisations, together on one platform. Fifteen ministries were identified as line or sectoral ministries in the 12 areas of critical concern and have their respective plan of action for the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, which the Ministry of Women and Children's



Affairs coordinates and monitors through a Monitoring and Evaluation Committee headed by the Minister.

The Government of Bangladesh has been working relentlessly to fight poverty with a special focus on women and, the Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia is taking special interest in the country's poverty alleviation programme. Special measures have been taken for women's economic empowerment through their participation in income-generating activities. The Bangladesh Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) is in its final stage of formulation.

An amount of Taka (Tk) 34.5 million has been allocated in the non-development budget of the current fiscal year (2004-2005) for financing micro-credit and there is another Tk. 520 million allocated in the development budget of various ministries and departments which are implementing micro-credit programmes. Specifically, the Department of Livestock is implementing the Participatory Livestock Development Project (PLDP) covering 0.35 million women beneficiaries. The Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock and Palli Karmo Shahayak Foundation are reaching more than 364,000 rural poor of which at least 50% are women. As per the World Bank Report (2004), about 12 million women are micro-credit borrowers with loans of 1.2 billion dollars and the loan repayment rate is 90%. The Vulnerable Group Development Programme (VGD), probably the largest development intervention, is part of the on-going effort to reach the poorest of the poor, especially women. Around 750,000 women including female-headed households received training in marketable income-generating skills, nutrition and other relevant trades, contributing to the improvement of the living standard. The Rural Maintenance Programme (RMP) benefits 42,000 women in 61 districts. Allocations for "Allowances for Widows and Destitute Women" have been increased.

The Government of Bangladesh has taken steps in enhancing the literacy rate in the country as well as making education free for all children, with a special focus on the girl-child. Female students of class VI-X in 460 class sub-districts are being awarded stipends

since 1993. Tuition fees for female students of up to grade XII have been waived and they are also provided with additional financial assistance for purchasing books as well as payment of examination fees. Approximately 5.57 million female students at secondary and higher secondary levels are getting stipends through five large projects. Another 6 million benefit from stipends for primary school students where the enrolment ratio of female/male student was 45:55 in 1991, increasing to 50:50 in 2002. The drop-out rates of female students at junior and secondary levels have correspondingly decreased. According to the World Bank Report of 2004, Bangladesh has one of the highest primary school enrolment rates in the developing world, including the enrolment of poor children. Bangladesh has achieved gender parity at the primary and lower secondary level. It is a government policy to recruit 60% female teachers in Government primary schools. Vocational training and human resource development specifically for women is undertaken by various Ministries.

Bangladesh has achieved significant progress in the area of primary health care, with an increase in life expectancy and a reduction in maternal mortality rate from nearly 6 per 1,000 live births in the 1990s to between 3.2 and 4.0 in 2001. The Government aims to reduce the maternal mortality rate to 2.75 per thousand live births and the total fertility rate (TFR) from 3.3 to 2.8 by 2015. Amongst other things, the Health, Nutrition and Population Sector Programme's Essential Services Package includes a focus on maternal health and a school health programme for adolescent reproductive health awareness. Contraception use is reported to be high. Recognising that women are particularly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, a "women's wing" of the National AIDS Committee was established to raise awareness on HIV/AIDS issues related to women.

The Minister informed the forum that the Government of Bangladesh has enacted several laws such as the *The Suppression of Violence Against Women and Children Act 2002*, *Acid Control Act 2002*, *Acid Crime Control Act 2002* and *Speedy Trial Tribunal Act 2002*, to prevent violence against women. Other initiatives include a one-stop crisis centres (and a planned DNA lab) to provide legal, medical and other required assistance to women and victims of violence, Safe Custody Homes for Women and awareness-raising on the issues. Trafficking of Women and Children has received special attention and the Ministry of Home Affairs has been regularly monitoring the disposal of cases of human trafficking and combating it through an 18-member inter-ministerial committee.

As of now, there is no armed conflict in Bangladesh and, as such, the victimisation of women on account of armed conflict in Bangladesh does not exist.

Women's participation in economic activity is increasing at faster rate than that of the male labour force, the highest being in the informal sector (private, 22.7%), followed by formal sector (private, 6.2%). In the formal sector, women are in the Government service (11.9%) and non-profit institutions (44.2%). Export-oriented industries have boosted employment of women and an estimated 1.8 million women now work in development sector alone. Among the professional, technical, administrative and managerial groups, female employment is high in public/autonomous and private formal sector. On the other hand, private informal work are in agriculture, forestry, fisheries and transport service. Female sale and service workers are also mostly in the private informal sector.

To encourage women to join the civil service, a recruitment quota of 10% in officer ranks and 15% quota in other jobs have been introduced. Men and women in the public sector enjoy the same benefits and amenities including pay, allowances, pension and other financial benefits. Paid maternity leave has been increased from three to four months and, day-care centres have been set up in office premises in the Secretariat.

At the local government level, one third of the members of Union Parishad are women, elected through direct elections. A recent provision raises the number of reserved seats for women in Parliament from 30 to 45 (in a house of 300 members).

In terms of institutional mechanisms, the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs plays a key coordinating and advocacy role. There is a National Council for Women's Development, with ministerial level representation of various ministries and also representatives of the civil society as members, chaired by the Prime Minister.

There is a permanent Law Commission aimed to promote gender equality in the legal system and review discriminatory laws, among others. Family courts with lower cost and simplified procedure have been instituted and arrangement has been made for support, where required, to finance cost of litigation.

The media is active in promoting gender equality and rights of women through a balanced and positive portrayal of women. The Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs (MWCA) conducted a series of training on gender-responsive reporting for editors of newspapers, film producers, scriptwriters, censor board members, performers, radio and television programme producers. The increasing number of women in media is showing positive impact and there are 150 women journalists in Bangladesh today.

There is also a National Plan of Action for Children which emphasises the rights of the girl child and focuses on five

areas, e.g. Food and Nutrition, Health, Education and Empowerment of the Girl Child, Protection from Abuse, Exploitation and Violence and Physical Environment. In addition to the National Children Policy, other policies have been formulated such as education policy, health policy, safe water supply and sanitation policy and nutrition policy to improve the quality of life of the children, with specific focus on girls.

The Minister mentioned that South Asian countries were prone to natural disasters and that women and children were the worst affected. There was a need to adopt measures to alleviate the suffering of women and children due to natural calamities. She said that although considerable progress has been made in this regard, a lot more needs to be done.

The Government has adopted a National Environment Management Plan (NEMAP). The relationship of women with the environment is considered to be one of the key areas of intervention. All projects dealing with the environment must have a gender perspective and take into account the needs and concerns of women and especially rural women.

In terms of achieving the goal of gender equality in all spheres of national life, the Minister stated that with the support of the national, regional and international agencies, the Government is confident of achieving these goals in the near future. To promote the work already being done vis-à-vis women, she was pleased to announce that the Government had requested UNIFEM to set up its programme office in Bangladesh. The Government of Bangladesh also announced that they would be honoured to host the next biennial meeting and look forward to welcoming the delegates in Bangladesh.

Response from Civil Society

Ms. Ayesha Khanam of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, and Ms. Salma Khan, CEDAW Committee Member, Bangladesh, acknowledged the Government of Bangladesh's strong policies to bring about gender equality and improve the condition of women and children in the country, as well as in making progress in the key priority areas in Bangladesh over the last two years.

Ms. Ayesha Khanam noted that the declining representation of women in parliament was a matter of concern, although there are many positive experiences in the Union Councils and at the grassroot level such as having a woman elected as City Commissioner.

Violence against women remains an issue. Bangladesh has laws addressing VAW but laws alone are not enough and innovative strategies to prevent violence against women are needed. A few participants shared strategies

adopted by community women to counter domestic violence, e.g. women who are members of a local community group would disclose to their fellow members that they had experienced domestic violence and the local group would then go and talk to the husband, ask him to desist from such act of violence. In some places, women would alert the community for support when there is incidence of domestic violence in the neighbourhood by beating on pots, pans and other kitchen utensils to create noise and, community members would then come to the woman's rescue. Other participants noted with concern the increase in migration of women, trafficking and forced prostitution.

Civil society representatives noted the many positive developments and initiatives taken by the Ministry, especially with regards to gender mainstreaming and the comprehensive institutional arrangement for facilitating the same. However, it was observed that the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs is constrained by inadequate human resources and budgetary allocations to implement its mandate of mainstreaming and coordination. Members urged donors to support the development of a long term strategy for strengthening the Ministry rather than by supporting projects that could only further burden the Ministry.

Participants commended the institutionalised mechanism for government and civil society networking and collaboration developed by the Ministry and noted that it can serve as a model for replication in other countries. New initiatives such as policy research and engendering the national budget in year 2000 were appreciated, but it was urged that a monitoring mechanism be added. A few participants commented on the micro-credit and skill development programmes for women and wondered about its impact on poverty.

Ms. Mahmuda Islam noted that there were several studies and researches undertaken to look at the impact of micro-credit programme on women in the ready-made garment industry. Micro-credit programmes have contributed towards empowerment of women to some extent, enabling them to set up their own enterprises. Studies show that there have been some gains but, there are concerns that micro-credit programmes cannot really bring women out



of the poverty situation. Recently, the Bangladesh government and several organisations are focusing more on developing women entrepreneurs. There is no exact data about the specific extent of poverty among women as the national data is not sex-disaggregated. This is another gap and there are efforts to develop a database along these lines.

The group also noted that growing globalisation presents new opportunities and challenges to policy makers who should take steps to minimise negative effects on women and men. The advancement of new technologies poses a threat to women in the workforce who are employed in semi-skilled areas and the issues of workers must be taken into account for future strategies.

Bhutan

Chaired by H.E. Ms. Zaahiya Zareer
Minister of Gender, Family Development and Social Security
Government of Maldives

Dr. Rinchen Chophel, Executive Director, National Commission for Women and Children, Royal Government of Bhutan, began his presentation with a tribute to all the delegates for protecting women and for keeping the women's rights agenda alive.

Referring to the inaugural speech by Mr. Shaukat Aziz, Prime Minister of Pakistan, Dr. Chophel informed the forum that for the Government of Bhutan, the Buddhist philosophy of life has provided the foundation for women's rights. Bhutan has strong traditions that support women's rights and these traditions find them in a strong position within the family as well as in society.



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From its First Five-Year Plan in 1961, Bhutan has invested in people and in the social sector. Bhutan's development philosophy is strongly rooted in the concept of 'gross national happiness', measured in definitive terms of improvement in the happiness and well-being of people rather than mere growth of GNP. The four major areas for development have been identified as economic growth and development, preservation and promotion of cultural heritage, preservation and sustainable use of the environment and good governance.

Health and education standards have improved tremendously in Bhutan and, likewise, women's health and welfare have come along with it. In 2002, there were thirty (30) hospitals (including 1 indigenous hospital), 166 Basic Health Units, 455 Outreach Clinics and 20 indigenous treatment centres reaching more than 90% of the country's population. Child immunization coverage is about 90% and iodine deficiency disorders have been eliminated.

About 42.1% of Bhutan's population is under 15 years. Education is free. The gross primary enrolment rate is estimated at 84.2%. Of those who enroll, 69.3% complete primary education and 39% reach Class X. In 2004, there were a total number of 155,234 students (approximately 50% women), trainees and learners

enrolled in 433 schools, 14 institutions and 455 Non-Formal Education centres facilitated by 5,216 teachers, trainers and instructors. Female enrolment is higher than males in the capital city Thimphu. Girls constitute 30% of the total enrolment in institutes of technical education.

The Royal Government of Bhutan has ratified the CEDAW and CRC without any reservations, signifying its deep commitment. Accordingly, Bhutan has engaged in a process of harmonisation of its legal systems and penal codes in line with its international commitments. National mechanisms have been put in place. The National Commission for Women and Children is an independent autonomous body reporting directly to the three arms of the government, e.g. to the Prime Minister, to the Chief Justice and to the Speaker of the National Assembly. Bhutan has overcome its initial hesitation in reporting to the CRC and CEDAW committees and, by now, has completed six reports for CEDAW and, likewise, completed the CRC report, while the national report is due this year. The process of reporting to Treaty Bodies (CRC and CEDAW) has led to an increased confidence.

In the last few years, there has been a growing appreciation of gender and human rights issues. In the last two years, workshops and seminars on human rights, CEDAW and CRC have been organised by the National Commission for Women and Children in collaboration with donor partners. Bhutan is trying to link gender and human rights to the on-going development process in the country. Currently, the draft Constitution of Bhutan, which includes a chapter on fundamental rights, is being reviewed and debated by the public.

Bhutan is divided into three regions: East, West and Central and has 38 districts. In the Eastern region, all government officials have been trained as gender has been mainstreamed in all planning and monitoring activities. During 2005 to 2006, with the help of UNICEF and UNDP, Bhutan will plan and implement according to the rights-based approach. More importantly, the Government will be involved in developing a gender master plan, based on the comments received from the CEDAW committee, the Poverty Study of 2004 and the MDG Progress Report. Other initiatives taken in 2005 include research on women and children and Bhutan's second Human Development Report (which is in a final draft stage).

In recent years, a number of laws have been passed that address violence against women. Bhutan's Penal Code 2004 covers violence against women, though attempts to define domestic violence have not been successful. Currently, there are a number of laws that protect women's rights such as inheritance rights, land rights (over 60% of rural and 45% of urban women hold property titles), marriage rights, and the Rape Act. Bhutan is also in the process of negotiating with the UN,

NGOs and the National Commission to conduct a baseline study on violence against women.

The Government stated that the National Commission for Women and Children had a mandate to receive, monitor and investigate violation of rights and a Bhutan-specific strategy is planned based on regional experiences and mechanisms currently being reviewed. This research will be carried out by the National Commission for Women and Children and its local chapters, which will also be involved in the investigation and monitoring of rights violations.

A number of new organisations are now taking up the issue of violence against women. For example, RENEW (Respect, Educate, Nurture, Empower Women) set up under the auspices of Her Highness, the Queen, aims to support marginalized women and focuses on addressing violence against women. Another new initiative launched by the Government is a permanent Women's Consultative Group called SAWAK, which will focus on issues of violence against women in Bhutan. A National Children's and Women's Assembly is also planned for 2005, which will take on board some of the recommendations of the Islamabad Conference. A consultation with parliamentarians and governors will be organized in July 2005 to focus on the rights of women and violence against women.

Bhutan ratified the SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children in 2003. The Bhutan Penal Code has clear provisions on both inter- and intra-country trafficking. The national consultation held in 2004 had recommended to the National Commission to conduct a study on the status, nature and extent of trafficking in Bhutan. The Government is cognisant and concerned about the reports of violence of Bhutanese women who have been trafficked. There is also concern that the young girls and boys reported 'missing' may actually have been trafficked.

The Government of Bhutan recognises HIV/AIDS as one of the biggest challenges to Bhutan's development. There is strong political commitment to address the same. In 2005, the King issued a decree on HIV and AIDS and, Her Majesty, the Queen, who is also UNIFEM's Goodwill Ambassador, is spearheading the advocacy and awareness campaign. In addition, there are about twenty fully functional, multi-sector task forces in all the armed forces cantonments, voluntary groups of servicemen's wives who are involved in advocacy which includes family planning and condom distribution among the families of armed forces. There are also STDs/HIV outreach programmes for commercial sex workers in towns and townships. The commitment to the HIV/AIDS issue is also seen from the fact that the government has signed a \$5 million project with the World Bank.

To support women's political participation, Bhutan has recently launched a gender mainstreaming and leadership training of female community workers in the eastern part of the country. The government believed that women's participation is inadequate, inhibited partly by cultural norms and, it recognises the importance of encouraging women to take on decision-making roles.

Concluding with a quote from an old Buddhist proverb, 'Even if you are uncertain of where you are going from here on, take pride in the many mountains and valleys you have traversed so far to reach this point', Mr. Chopel expressed his Government's pride in engendering policies which is an important milestone, as Bhutan started late but has caught up with the other South Asian countries.

Response from Civil Society

Dasho Dawa Dem, Secretary, Women's Association for Bhutan, mentioned that until last year, Bhutan had only one women's organization, e.g. the National Women's Association which was formed by a resolution passed by the National Assembly in 1980. There are a few other NGOs now like RENEW which are trying to uplift the socio-economic status of the women in Bhutan. Further, the National Commission for Women and Children was also formed only one year ago and, while the process of gender mainstreaming within institutions has begun, there are areas where there is room for improvement. Specifically, the following areas require attention:

- There should be more cooperation between the NGOs and the government, as without the support of the government, NGOs cannot go far.
- Although, in Bhutan, the laws, e.g. the marriage act, property and inheritance law and other legislations, have put women at par with men, there is a need to encourage women to be involved in decision-making, both in the local and national government.
- More than numbers, the country needs active NGOs working at the grassroots level, for which capacity-building and financial resources are required.

A discussion ensued and it was noted that Bhutan was a matriarchal society, that has not necessarily had focussed programmes for women. Men rely on their sisters to support them if they are unemployed and the burden of maintaining property and livelihoods falls on women. Similarly, while there is no formal gender bias, it does not follow that there is gender sensitivity or an understanding of gender concepts and gender-sensitive planning, etc. Hence, gender mainstreaming continues to be on the agenda of the government and civil society.

The Inheritance Act, 2002 has given equal rights to men and women but, inheritance by men is not socially acceptable so very few men exercise this right. It is also believed by some that this places a burden on women and bars them from participation in education (literacy rates are low), government and politics, etc. It appears then that positive cultural traditions and customary practices did not necessarily lead to an enhanced quality of life for women.

The discussion also noted that Bhutan has a relatively high levels of social sector investment, e.g. health and education account for 22% of GDP. It was suggested that investments in health infrastructure and communications needs to be enhanced to meet the challenge in terms of providing services to remote and scattered communities, especially related to women's health.

In response to the participants' questions about the effects of globalisation on women's lives in Bhutan, the Government informed the forum that Bhutan has only recently signed a number of treaties and was on the road to becoming a member of the World Trade Organisation. However, looking at the monetary economy and how global capital is organised, Bhutan has concerns on the repercussions on communities of consequent societal shifts. For example, extended families being replaced by smaller nuclear families and single working parents. These issues brought with them an added dimension of vulnerability and risk. The Government is still studying the ramifications of globalisation on Bhutan's economic and social structures.

India

Chaired by Dr. Rinchen Chopel
Executive Director
National Commission for Women and Children,
Department of Health
Royal Government of Bhutan

H.E. Ms. Kanti Singh, Minister of State, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, appreciated the excellent opportunity that the Fifth South Asia Regional Ministerial Conference - 'Celebrating Beijing Plus Ten' provided for sharing experiences in gender mainstreaming and achieving the goals outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action.

The Minister noted that the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) was a landmark event that set the pace for women's empowerment. The Beijing Platform for Action (PFA), pegged on the pillars of human rights and gender equality, was accepted by India without reservation. The ten-year eventful journey since Beijing has been marked with shared learning, partnerships, achievements and advancement for women in different spheres.

The Minister was pleased to share that India had taken measures to address the problems confronting women. One example being that as early as 1993, one third of elected seats in the rural and urban local bodies were reserved for women. The reservation of one-third seats in local government institutions has resulted in over a million women participating actively at the grassroot political processes. Leadership training and capacity-building of the elected women representatives was taken up at a massive scale and their increased networking has transformed them into effective and efficient leaders in their community. The Government has initiated gender-mainstreaming measures at the Union and State levels to ensure that gender concerns are brought to the centre stage in all aspects of public expenditure and policy. A bill for the reservation of one-third seats in state and national legislatures is ready and consensus is being built before it is presented in parliament.

The Government, through its Common Minimum Programme, has endeavoured to ensure elimination of



gender discrimination and economic empowerment of women through equal rights of ownership such as lands, shelter, etc. The government has guaranteed at least a hundred days of work to one person per family in rural areas to provide employment. One of the thrust areas identified by the Prime Minister for development of women is legal equality for women in all enactments.

Recognising the role of education in the empowerment of women, concrete steps have been taken to reduce the gender gap in enrolment, to increase retention at the school level and to increase participation of women in higher and technical education. Among the significant achievements of the decade has been the decline in the absolute number of females who are not literate.

India has effectively put in place the largest micro-finance programme in the world. Women in remote villages are coming together to form self-help groups (SHGs) to access credit and start income generation ventures. Federation of SHGs have emerged at the state and regional levels. To improve women's access to land, surplus state land is redistributed to the SHGs and registration of women as joint owners of land is encouraged.

In the context of the adverse effects of liberalisation and globalisation on women, a gender perspective is being integrated into macro-economic policies. The focus is on infrastructure, capacity-building, and enterprise development skills of women as that would benefit them both as workers and entrepreneurs. Interventions to prevent exploitation and casualisation of labour have been adopted like fixation of minimum contractual wages and various social security measures which have already led to beneficial outcomes on income and working conditions for women. Further, supportive steps are necessary to enable women to overcome the restrictions and challenges they face, while at the same time enabling them to explore trade gains that may accrue in hitherto unexplored sectors.

The identification of areas of concern has implications for the mechanisms and institutions through which programme interventions are expected to translate into desirable outcomes. Several innovations in this respect have been introduced in the last few years, such as new methods of gender mainstreaming and gender-budgeting. The Tenth Plan has initiated action in tying up the concept of Women's Component Plan and gender-budgeting to develop a gender perspective in planning.

The Women's Component Plan and gender budgeting which record funds earmarked for schemes targeted to women and girls and those with a significant women's component are effective mechanisms in the planning process for targeting public expenditure in favour of women. The recent guidelines issued by the Department

of Women and Child Development have enabled other Departments and State Governments in taking up gender-budgeting exercises. In course of time, all Departments will be required to present gender budgets, as announced by the Finance Minister of India in his recent budget speech. In the area of gendered statistics, important steps have been taken to improve the database on women to institutionalise a system of data collection and to use this data in planning and advocacy for gender mainstreaming.

The National Commission for Women was set up by an Act of Parliament as early as 1992 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. Several Acts are in place to protect women against violence. Efforts are on to strengthen their implementation. Some of the Acts are being amended to make the punishments more severe. Some new Bills are also on the anvil like protection from domestic violence, sexual harassment at workplace, etc. The Supreme Court of India, through its activist role, has infused dynamism into the constitutional and legal provisions and has issued directives to the State from time to time to further safeguard and strengthen the rights of women.

A number of institutions are in place to assist women receive speedier justice such as fast track courts and Family Courts, greater recruitment of women police officers, establishment of women police cells and exclusive women police stations. There are 450 homes under the Social Welfare Board being run by NGOs that provide short stay for women in need.

The declining sex-ratio is a cause of concern that is being addressed through multi-pronged strategy of strengthening legislation and adopting measures to build public opinion through mass media campaigns.

The Constitution of India confers equal rights and opportunities on men and women in the political, economic and social spheres. The promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women is one of the central concerns of the Tenth Plan (2002-2007) which spells out a three-pronged strategy for empowering women:

- **Social empowerment:** create an enabling environment through adopting various policies and programmes for development of women besides providing them with easy and equal access to all the basic minimum services so as to enable them to realise their full potential.
- **Economic empowerment:** ensure provision of training, employment and income generation activities with both forward and backward linkages with the ultimate objective of making all women economically independent and self-reliant.

- **Gender justice:** eliminate all forms of gender discrimination and, thus, enable women to enjoy not only *de jure* but also *de facto* rights and fundamental freedom on par with men in all spheres of life, political, economic, social, civil and cultural.

India has not only integrated the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) into its Tenth Plan but, also set targets in the areas covered by the MDGs which go far beyond the MDGs themselves, e.g. reduction in gender gaps in literacy and wage rates by at least 50% by 2007, reduction of Maternal Mortality Rate to 2 per 1000 live births by 2007 and reduction of Infant Mortality Rate to 45 per 1000 live births by 2007 and to 28 by 2012. The MDGs may only have Goal 3 to specifically promote gender equality and empowerment of women, while it needs to be seen as an essential component of all the other development goals as cross-cutting theme rather than a stand-alone objective.

Response from Civil Society

Prof. Pam Rajput, Chairperson, Asia Pacific Women's Watch, expressed her admiration for the unique mechanism of the meeting that facilitates accountability, sharing, monitoring and deliberations, etc. She recommended that the meetings focus on reporting and monitoring commitments made at the last meeting.



Prof. Rajput commended the many achievements in the area of women's rights & empowerment but, noted that the problem is with the implementation of initiatives. She observed that eighteen departments of the Government of India, will have gender-budgeting cells however, resources and technical capacity may impede realisation of the objectives of the initiatives.

She also pointed to the issue of the 'missing girl child' or what could be an issue of the 'survival of the girl child' as sex-selective abortions, child marriages, and dowry burnings still continue. The Government has internal monitoring mechanisms in place which need to be strengthened and she recommended the inclusion of NGOs in the monitoring mechanisms.

Ms. Ruth Manorama, President, National Alliance for Women, reflected on whether micro-credit packages are

the answer to poverty. She suggested that a more comprehensive framework is needed to address community issues. A shift was needed from 'women's work' to 'women's livelihoods' and how this is being addressed in countries of the region. Emphasising the importance of addressing VAW and domestic violence, she felt that violence due to caste and religion should also be addressed.

Dr. Neelam Gorhe, of Stree Adhar Kendra, agreed with the Government that many positive actions and programmes have taken place. However, some of the commitments made at the Fourth World Conference on Women still remain unfulfilled. For example, a Commissioner of Women's Rights has still not been appointed and the National Commission for Women does not have enough powers. She expressed pride in the strength of the country's democracy as irrespective of differences with the Government, one was able to share, struggle and find space for issues.

Ms. Nigar Ahmed, Executive Director, Aurat Foundation Pakistan, expressed concern at the media trend, particularly in films, of showing gender-based violence, sometimes quite explicitly.

Ms. Nimalka Fernando, Director, IMADR Asia-Sri Lanka, queried about the inter-country mechanisms to counter trafficking of women between Nepal, India and Bhutan, especially since there was a SAARC Convention in place.

Ms. Koh Miyaoi, Social Affairs Officer, Gender and Development Section, UNESCAP, queried about the roles and responsibilities of the National Commission for Women and the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Human Resource Development

on whether there was an overlap and, who, for example, prepares and tables new bills, who prepares the CEDAW report, etc.

Ms. Reva Nayyar, Secretary, Department of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Human Resource Development, responded to all the queries and clarified the position of the government. On the issue of trafficking of women, India has an open border policy with Nepal and no visas are required: women come for employment and some are trafficked for prostitution. The issues are taken up in bilateral talks, border police is involved in discussions with the Ministry and studies have also been undertaken revealing that women come into the country for multiple reasons.

She clarified that the National Commission for Women has been set up as a statutory body under an Act of Parliament to investigate cases of rights violations, commission studies and recommend strategies. It is an advisory/recommendatory body that can request the government to take action and, in case no action is taken, the government has to explain its position. Further, the NCW can send cases to the police for prosecution and so the NGOs' demand for a Commissioner on Women's Rights to prosecute violations would result in duplication.

She agreed with the comment on violence in the media even though there is a large censor board (chaired by a woman) and sensitive producers. Dr. Girija Vyas, Chairperson, NCW, informed the meeting that a media bill has been presented to parliament and the Film Industry has also agreed to develop internal rules to monitor portrayal of women and VAW.