



**Speech on the occasion of the Closing of the
“South Asia Conference on Women’s Political Leadership”**

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Honourable Deputy Leader of the House, Ms. Syeda Sajeda Chowdury, MP;
Honourable Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Dipu Moni, MP;
Honourable Members of Parliament;
Distinguished country delegates and international guests;
Distinguished representatives from the international community, academia, and civil society;
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I stand before you this evening, I am both humbled and inspired. It seems that all of you are saying, “We can make a difference”. And you are saying this, not only as honourable and committed members of Parliament, but as individuals, as citizens of your respective countries, as a part of a group, or a women’s caucus. We are saying -- “Let’s achieve gender equality” not only as women, but as men and women, working together. I am sure that I can speak for the United Nations in all of the countries you are representing here today, in stating, that the United Nations will be proud to stand by you, and to support you, in your urgent work to achieve gender equality.

I sat through all of the sessions yesterday and I’ve been in touch with colleagues throughout today. The Success Strategies that were read in the conference declaration capture the spirit of the discussions and defines our directions forward. I encourage all the relevant stakeholders of South Asian countries to consider seriously the concrete strategies presented today to enable women to participate more fully, and to lead in politics as well as to improve the quantity and quality of women’s political leadership.

In this regard, I want to join the voices echoed in the declaration and stand in support of the commitment that have championed Women’s Political Leadership for decades -- to call for a renewed approach, one that yields transformational leaders -- one that starts a transformation within individuals and transcends the personal to change institutions and society.

Before I hand over the floor, I would like to reflect, once again, on why gender equality is so important, and how the United Nations can help you to achieve your targets, within your respective countries.

Why is Gender Equality important? Here, in this conference, we have agreed:

Gender Equality is a fundamental human right;

Gender equality is a core objective of human development;

Gender equality is an economic imperative. A simple example: for Bangladesh, the only road to Middle Income Status by 2021 goes explicitly through economic empowerment of women!

What can we do, as United Nations, towards Gender Equality?

Promoting political voice: the United Nations can help to achieve more inclusive elections, we can help to frame the arguments for gender equality, and we can help Parliament in their struggles for quality legislation and budgetary oversight. We can help the police and the judiciary to reduce systemic bias against women. But we cannot achieve any sustainable results without national leadership on these issues, without women, like all of you, to stand up and demand change. If you are organized, if you are ready to take on these challenges, the United Nations is ready to help.

Economic empowerment: The United Nations brings innovative ideas and some funding, towards the objective of sustainably improving women's capacities to earn money, and to manage and control that money. Here in Bangladesh, the UN is not alone in this endeavour, and great work has been done by national and international actors. Nevertheless, I can say that I was truly inspired by the women I have met through UNDP's REOPA project. Through the course of a 2 year programme, these women, the poorest in their communities, have earned and saved money, they have learned real-life skills and they have initiated businesses that have carried them into prosperity. Their keen desire to give back is a powerful reminder that we must all give back to our communities regardless of our relative wealth.

Social action towards the Millennium Development Goals (or the "MDG's"): The United Nations is engaged in all of the countries represented here, in supporting Governments in the achievement of the MDG's. Women are explicitly at the forefront of MDG 3, promoting Gender Equality and women's empowerment, but also benefit with progress towards each and every MDG. I'd especially like to note the deep commitment of the Honorable Prime Minister to girl's education in Bangladesh, and the massive achievements that have been made.

Advocacy: Let's make sure that everyone, in every country, knows about the international treaties and conventions, adopted by their Government, committing the country towards gender equality. United Nations can help focus the national debate around a country's international commitments, help to define actions and operational actions towards their achievement. But we don't stop at the commitments to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and to CEDAW, etc. etc. Let's ALSO talk about national constitutions, and existing laws, in terms of how they address gender equality. If we have a good legal framework, let's work to implement its provisions, if it's bad, then change it! The United Nations can help the national actors – not only you, the Parliamentarians, who frame the laws, but also those actors who implement the laws, or those who adjudicate after the violation of those laws. We can

help build the capacities of the organizations and entities that monitor compliance with those laws. Advocacy is a powerful tool, especially when it is used within the national framework, within the definition of national objectives, and supports national actors who are, ultimately responsible for gender equality.

Through our support in promoting political voice, in economic empowerment of women, in social action and advocacy, the United Nations is always focused on building national capacities, on achieving results and reinforcing the availability of quality, gender-disaggregated data. In moving forward, UNDP will continue to work on strengthening women's political leadership both at the regional level, in the respective countries represented here, and in Bangladesh. From the UNDP Regional Centre, we will follow-up and work with a network of people committed to nurture the next generation of women political leaders in Asia and the Pacific. We will be pleased to provide assistance for advancing the concrete strategies identified in the declaration. Two knowledge products will be produced as part of this process which will focus on the Alternative Pathways for Women into Politics and a Political Equality Action Plan.

Finally, I would like to state that throughout our work on gender equality, the United Nations brings a sense of URGENCY -- to the table! I hope that you can feel it with the UN colleagues you are working with in your country, and that their support is palpable towards the objectives you set for yourself.

In closing, I would also like to offer my sincere thanks to all the persons who worked to make this truly amazing conference, possible. I would like to thank the Parliament for hosting us. I would like to thank the delegates from the region, for traveling to be with us, and for their sincere and meaningful contributions. I recognise the hard work of my own team in UNDP Bangladesh, and their excellent team work with the UNDP Asia Pacific Regional Centre, in pulling us together, in holding us together, through an intense few days. I am also pleased to thank the National Democratic Institute for their valuable contribution and support to this conference.

As I take my seat, let us celebrate women's full and effective participation in democratic life and let us commit ourselves to play our respective part in achieving our ultimate goal of gender equality.

Thank you and good evening!