

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY  
SAARC SECRETARIAT; 08 MARCH 2022

REMARKS BY H. E. MR. ESALA RUWAN WEERAKOON, SECRETARY GENERAL OF SAARC

Ms. Amanda Bissex, Deputy Regional Director, UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia,  
Dr. Yogita Sapkota, National Academy of Medical Sciences,  
Mrs. Neeva Pradhan, International Corporate Coach, Leadership & Mindfulness Programmes,  
Dear Colleagues from the SAARC Secretariat,  
Ladies and Gentlemen!

I extend a very warm welcome to all the Ladies and Gentlemen, for joining us to celebrate the International Women's Day, dedicated to the theme, "Gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow" and add our collective voice to the "Break the Bias" campaign. Break the Bias, focusses on creating a world free of bias, stereotypes and discrimination and celebrating gender equality in workplaces, schools, and communities. I congratulate you all on this occasion. Happy Women's Day!

We celebrate International Women's Day every year to honour women's immense strengths and unique abilities. This is the Day dedicated to celebrating and honoring the multi-faceted achievements of women in their journey towards gender equality.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are living in an era when the world is increasingly more supportive of women's empowerment socially, culturally, legally and politically. It is encouraging to see greater access and gender parity in education. Maternal and child mortality rates are plummeting in most parts of South Asia. With expanding economic opportunities, more women are participating in the labour market and becoming economically independent.

While the broad progress we have secured is evident, the Covid - Pandemic has likely frustrated these gains. It has affected men and women differently. Despite attempts by decision makers to curtail the negative impact of Covid - 19 on public health and the economy, by varying character of sectors and occupations, women and girls have suffered in ways that have possibly worsened inequalities.

For example, on the economic front, women face higher rates of job loss, a greater burden of domestic and care work, reduced financial independence and decreased prospects of mobility. In areas of health and wellbeing, women have faced an increased risk of pregnancy related deaths and spikes in physical and domestic violence.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The United Nations points out that the quest of gender equality is further compromised by threats posed by climate change and other disasters in the twenty-first century. Women are recognized as being more vulnerable to climate change impacts than men, as they constitute the majority of the

world's poor and are more dependent on natural resources, which climate change threatens the most.

At the same time, women and girls are often inspirational change agents. They can be effective leaders for climate adaptation and mitigation. They are involved in sustainability initiatives around the world, and their participation results in more effective climate action. Continuing to examine the opportunities, as well as the constraints, to empower women and girls to have a voice and be equal players in decision-making related to climate change is essential for sustainable development and greater gender equality. Without a viable road map towards gender equality, a sustainable future with equitable opportunities for all, become a nonstarter.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

SAARC attaches high priority to empowering women and promoting gender equality. The SAARC Leaders have time and again underscored the importance of promoting gender equality during successive SAARC Summits, which culminated in the adoption of the SAARC Social Charter, incorporating a broad range of targets to be achieved across the region in poverty eradication, population stabilization, empowerment of women, youth mobilization, human resource development, promotion of health and nutrition, and protection of children.

Another important regional instrument is the SAARC Convention on Combating the Crime of Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution, which was signed in January 2002. The Convention provides a legal framework for the protection of women and children. A Regional Task Force has been formed to monitor and facilitate the implementation of this Convention.

The mechanism of the Ministerial Meetings on Women, assisted by the Technical Committee of Women, Youth and Children, is another important mechanism that provides policy directives in taking forward SAARC's agenda in empowering women.

As a result of these intra-regional initiatives, all the SAARC countries have evolved as societies where issues pertaining to women empowerment and gender equality are duly reflected in their constitutions, legislations, mechanisms and structures to ensure active engagement of women in social, economic and political spheres.

According to a World Bank Report released on 1st March, several countries in the region have made steady progress in closing gaps between men and women, with Nepal topping the list of eight countries, in the Women, Business and Law 2022 Index. I take this opportunity to pay a tribute to the women of Nepal for this admirable feat.

Distinguished Ladies in particular; you are here to celebrate your achievements. It is an apt occasion for you to rejoice the contributions you have made, as role models, to your home, neighborhood, society, country and the world. Please continue your good work to put "women first" in all that you do.

Let us all, "Break The Bias" to bring women into the mainstream of national and international development. As your partners, we are willing to support you in all that you do in the service of humanity and in securing a more equal future for all.

Let us together, take this moment, to imagine a gender equal world that is free of bias, stereotypes and discrimination. A world that is diverse, equitable and inclusive. On this day, there cannot be a more solemn pledge we can all undertake.

Happy Women's Day to all of you, once again!

Thank you.

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