

SOUTH ASIAN CONFERENCE ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
KATHMANDU; TUESDAY, 15 MARCH 2022

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

The Rt. Hon'ble Nanda Kishor Pun, Vice President of Nepal,
Hon'ble Top Bahadur Magar, Chairperson, National Human Rights Commission,
Hon'ble Kamala Parajuli, Chairperson, National Women Commission,
Hon'ble Lily Thapa, Member of the National Human Rights Commission,
Prof. Dr. Shashi Adhikary, President of the Women NGOs Federation,
Distinguished Speakers on the Dias,
Your Excellencies Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Esteemed Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a privilege for me to address this Inaugural Session of the South Asian Conference on *Violence Against Women and Girls*.

I acknowledge the distinguished presence of the Rt. Hon'ble Nanda Kishor Pun, Vice President of Nepal. Excellency, your valuable presence signifies the importance of this Conference as well as your commitment and that of the Government to address the issue of "Violence Against Women and Girls". We look forward to benefitting from Your Excellency's Special Address.

I congratulate the Women NGOs Federation Nepal for organizing this important Conference, in collaboration with the National Human Rights Commission and the National Women Commission. The excellent arrangements made for the Conference augur well for its success.

I join our gracious hosts in welcoming the delegates and other experts from South Asia to discuss a topic that is so crucial to the welfare of women across the globe, including South Asia. With your deep knowledge and insights, I am confident of a very fruitful outcome of this Conference.

This Conference is timely as it is being convened soon after the commemoration of International Women's Day, celebrating women's multi-faceted accomplishments and immense contributions that they, as role models, have made to their home, society, country and the world.

Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are living in an era when the world is increasingly 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 decreasing in most parts of South Asia. With expanding economic opportunities, more women are participating in the labour market and becoming economically independent.

Things were looking brighter for women across the globe prior to the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic, which has, unfortunately, reversed the gains so far achieved towards women's

advancement and empowerment. Moreover, since the outbreak of COVID-19, emerging data and reports have shown that violence against women and girls, particularly domestic violence, has intensified. School closures have left girls at greater risk of dropping out of school and into early marriage. It is in this context that the convening of this Conference is very pertinent.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Women and girls are vulnerable to violence as a result of multiple forms of discrimination and inequalities, including age, ethnicity, caste, poverty, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, religion, nationality and immigration status.

Violence against women and girls is a human rights violation, negatively affecting women's wellbeing and preventing them from fully participating in society.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is evident that violence against women and girls is a major impediment to women's economic empowerment and sustainable development. Violence, both at home and at the workplace, carries varied and considerable costs to affected individuals, their families, communities, businesses and societies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As a regional organization comprising the eight Member States of South Asia, 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 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. The Convention provides a legal framework for the protection of women and children.

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.

I am happy to share with you that Nepal made the fastest progress among all South Asian Countries in closing gender based gaps, according to a recently released World Bank Report. Amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic that threatened progress towards gender equality, Nepal topped the list of SAARC Countries in the "Women, Business and the Law 2022 Index". I take this opportunity to pay a tribute to all the women of Nepal for this admirable accomplishment.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

While the SAARC region has achieved success in realizing gender equality, more remains to be done, to put an end to violence against women, which is on the rise since the onset of the pandemic. I am confident that the shared experiences and robust discussions gained from this Conference will provide a roadmap for ending all forms of violence and abuse against women and girls in the region.

I wish the Conference great success.

Thank you!
