

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

Mr Neal Walker

UNDP Resident Representative/Resident Coordinator

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Honourable Chief Whip, Md. Abdus Shahid
Honourable State Minister for Women and Children Affairs, Dr Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury
Honourable Members of Parliament
Distinguished country delegates and international guests
Distinguished representatives from the international community, academia, and civil society;

Ladies and Gentlemen;

It is with great pleasure that I address you today in the inauguration of the South Asia Conference on Women’s Political Leadership. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the Parliament of Bangladesh for carrying out such an important initiative.

As I welcome the participants from South Asian countries to Bangladesh, I would like to take a moment to reflect on the state of democracy in the sub-region and to link this to the progress of countries to ensure gender equality. Without a doubt the South Asian democratic landscape is varied, with a diversity of home grown efforts toward democracy. What remains constant across these countries is widespread support for the ideals of democracy and the realization that true democracy extends beyond political freedoms. At its core, it also addresses key issues of social justice, equity and equality.

In today’s world, no discussion on democracy or democratic consolidation can be complete without a focus on gender equality in all facets of life and specifically, in today’s context, equality in the political realm. The rationale for promoting greater women’s political representation at all levels is clear: women constitute approximately half the population and a society cannot claim to be democratic unless that half, the women, have full political rights.

At the same time, the mere existence of democratic institutions by itself, does not guarantee gender equality or increased participation of women at the political level. It is unrealistic to expect “democracy” to fix long-standing structural problems that reinforce inequality. It is therefore, essential for countries to adopt transformational attitudes towards gender equality that will yield concrete results, in terms of greater space for women’s involvement and participation.

I would like to recognize that many South Asian states have adopted progressive policies and actions that have, in fact, resulted in real progress towards this goal. As mentioned by previous speakers, equal political representation has been reflected in national constitutions as well as in the ratification of international conventions like the CEDAW, to promote and facilitate women’s direct involvement in public decision-making.

Additionally, South Asia has produced a number of women Presidents and Prime ministers. If I turn my attention specifically to Bangladesh, I can highlight that for the first time, there are

six female government ministers, including the Honourable Prime Minister. As you know, the Leader of the Opposition is also a woman. This has contributed to reducing gender prejudices regarding women's political roles in Bangladesh.

An important element of influence on women's representation in elected office is the nature of the electoral system and the use of affirmative action strategies within parties and parliaments. In Bangladesh, like other countries in the region, the system of quotas has been a key factor for change. In 1980, only 6% of elected representatives were women while the current parliament has 18% women's representation in parliament. Quota systems also exist at the local government level where women leaders have acted as driving forces for change. Thus, quotas have been at least somewhat effective in advancing women into political positions. But, I would like to emphasize, we need to look beyond the simple approach that increasing the number of women in the political sphere equals gender equality. We should strive for the establishment of a culture, effectively backed by law, which allows women to flourish, to provide meaningful contributions, in politics, in economic development and in the social sphere. We should strive for the combination of women's representation, a legal framework backed by effective implementation, and a culture of equality, to ensure that gender equality is real.

In the drive to address gender equality and promote greater political participation of women, greater attention should also be placed on enhancing the economic advancement of our women. Economic development is one proven way to transform a society. Bangladesh has set itself a laudable target, to achieve middle income status, by the year 2021. For me, it is clear: the fastest path to middle income status goes through the effective economic empowerment of women. And, that, in turn, will improve the levels of human development in the country and will also increase women's capacity to engage at the political level. Legal guarantees for women's political and economic participation need to be translated into real opportunities for decision-making and employment.

So how do we know how well we are doing? Countries have established mechanisms to advance and monitor policies towards gender equality. As the Minister noted, Bangladesh for instance, has established a National Council on Women and Development (1995) as well as a Ministry on Women and Children's Affairs (1998) and has adopted a National Action Plan for Advancement of Women. Such actions have the potential for accelerating gender-sensitive governance reforms which are instrumental in ensuring that states genuinely embrace commitments towards gender equality, thereby reinforcing democratic practices.

Ladies and gentlemen,

While formal commitments are critical, they are not enough. Governments in consultation with all societal actors, need to push for the realization of gender equality at all levels. Long lasting progress on the economic and social fronts is predicated on the recognition that women are equal partners with men in the development process.

Members of Parliament are well positioned to move this agenda forward. A large number of parliaments around the world including those in the South, have established gender mainstreaming structures like specialized parliamentary committees and female MPs caucuses which have contributed to gender sensitive legislative outputs. Such is the case in Bangladesh where the parliament has established a Committee on the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs. However, such structures are frequently underutilized. Alliances

between female and male MPs are key to realizing gender equality goals for the benefit of the society as a whole.

Political parties and other civil society actors also have a major role to play in promoting an enabling environment for the substantive participation of women in politics. It is imperative to review party nomination processes, election systems, election campaigns and, women's political education to ensure viable mechanisms for their substantive participation. Elections are about representation, stated simply; this means that women are needed in politics.

In Bangladesh, as in many other South Asian countries, the presence of women in high political positions does not yet represent the general trend. Positive discrimination measures need to be perfected; in some cases, women continue to be excluded from decision-making bodies. For instance, consideration should be given not only to not only increasing reserve seats to 30%, but to make them directly elected seats as well. The number of women elected into office while critical, has proven insufficient to transform traditional attitudes and behaviours in politics. Men need to be more fully engaged in gender equality programmes. Women need to be equipped with relevant skills and education. The work of women parliamentarians across party lines is very valuable for the promotion of gender sensitive policies and legislation.

Against this background, there is a need to look for the effective, durable solutions to persistent inequality. Transformation requires a change in the perception of women and men and their gender and social roles; a change in discourse; a change in policies; a change in legislation; a change in media coverage; and finally a change of institutions.

Distinguished country delegates,

It is our expectation that this South Asia Conference on Women Political Leadership will generate a substantive assessment of the policies and actions that governments have adopted and implemented to enhance women equal participation in politics. We need to identify and promote good lessons, successful practices and alternative solutions that can be reproduced, enhanced and sustained at both regional and national levels. Delegates representing political parties, civil society organizations, young leaders and policy-makers, all have a wealth of experiences and perspectives to contribute to these deliberations. Importantly, by bringing together such a diverse group, we hope to create a network of leaders committed to nurturing and supporting the next generation of women political leaders in the sub-region.

This is a unique opportunity facilitated by the Parliament of Bangladesh, for the South Asian Parliamentarians together with the other stakeholders gathered in this forum, to network, identify and carry forward mechanisms to support gender justice and equality. The parliament as an institution has a vital role to fulfil, in promoting enhanced women's political leadership, as a law making body, as a reflection of political inclusiveness, as the watchman for the implementation of the development process and most importantly, as the corner stone of democracy.

The UN System in Bangladesh remains committed to supporting Bangladesh combat the challenges to gender equality and women's participation. In June 2010, the UN System collaborated with Government ministries to undertake an intensive assessment of the status of the MDGs in Bangladesh and priority actions required for Bangladesh's achievement of the MDGs by the 2015 target. The results formed the basis for the UN System's formulation of

Bangladesh's new UNDAF 2012-2016 as the UN System's response to key development challenges. To highlight the importance of gender equality issues, Pillar 7 of the UNDAF specifically addresses the national priority of realizing gender equality and the importance of promoting women's political leadership.

We will continue to work with the Government and other stakeholders to integrate a gender perspective into all sectors and all phases of sector planning cycles, so women will be able to enjoy the same opportunities as men, and in turn, Bangladesh will be able to take full advantage of their contributions to the development of the economy, society and in politics. What we need to keep in mind is that we do this not only because gender equality is a core development objective, in and of itself, but also because gender equality is the fastest, surest path to advance the country across the range of all indicators that mark a country's success: economic development, education, health, and happiness.

In closing, let me state that it is an honour for UNDP to partner with the Bangladesh Parliament in this positive and encouraging initiative. I would like to thank the UNDP Asia Pacific Regional Centre, which through the Global Programme for Electoral Cycle Support, has been a co-organizer of this conference. Their substantive support has been essential to making this event happen. Likewise, I would also like to thank the National Democratic Institute (NDI) for their valuable contribution to the inception of this regional conference.

I wish you a successful conference.

Thank you.