

**Inaugural Remarks**  
**by**  
**Chandni Joshi**  
**Regional Programme Director**  
**UNIFEM South Asia**

- Honourable Smt. Pratibha Devisingh Patil, President of India,
- Your Excellency Mr. Dorji, Secretary General SAARC,
- Ms. Renuka Chowdhury, Honourable Minister, Ministry of Women and Child Development (Independent Charge) Government of India,
- Mr. Anil Kumar, Secretary, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India,
- Honourable Dr. Zehra, Chairperson, National Commission on the Status of Women Government of Pakistan

Excellencies, Distinguished delegates and colleagues,  
Friends from the media, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me begin by thanking you, Hon'ble President for so graciously accepting our invitation to inaugurate this, Sixth, South Asia Regional Ministerial Conference, "Commemorating Beijing". Allow me, Honourable President, to convey to you, our deepest admiration for your commitment to the empowerment of women. It is indeed a matter of great honor for all of us here today to have you with us.

I would like to extend my special thanks to Government of India for co-hosting this Regional Conference, with UNIFEM. Our deepest appreciation and thanks, go to, all our partners from across the region for keeping the Beijing torch alive.

I would like to express my appreciation to Ms. Renuka Chowdhury, Honourable Minister, Ministry of Women and Child Development, for your constant support and outstanding leadership at all times. It has been our privilege to have your proactive participation and engagement with, several of our initiatives.

We are indeed privileged to have with us Honourable Ministers and senior officials from the Governments of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and several key gender advocates from across South Asia, our partners, who have dared to dream and whose resolution, and stoicism, have created a new dawn for women, enabling them to reclaim their personhood.

For UNIFEM, Positive Partnerships with stakeholders from across the spectrum have been integral in promoting and achieving women's human rights and human security.

The biennial review process that UNIFEM has been facilitating for the last 13 years is a unique accountability forum, which brings together governments of the region, representatives of the women's movement, the SAARC Secretariat, to collectively track

progress on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. Co-hosted by governments of the region in turns, these processes have been participatory, transparent and have entailed introspection, and analysis of successes and gaps, followed by the formulation of action plans to address key priorities of the region.

The Consensus Document that emerges from these Regional Reviews is one of the instruments, that guides UNIFEM's work in South Asia, along with Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals, CEDAW, and Security Council Resolution 1325.

The first Regional Review was held in India, in 1996. Over the years, it has evolved as a strong platform and now has a life of its own. This goes to show the commitment and conviction of all stakeholders engaged in the process, directly or indirectly.

This process has, in its course, led to successful regional cross fertilization and cooperation, peer learning, exchange of good practices and promotion of, the progress of women.

This journey has been evolutionary. A case in point has been the need for sex disaggregated data and gender sensitive analyses – a need, subsequently reiterated at Beijing, SAARC Summits, Biennial Reviews, by the CEDAW Committee and in the MDGs.

In response, UNIFEM, in partnership with the SAARC Secretariat and the Governments of the region, is setting up a SAARC Gender Database, housed in the SAARC Secretariat. We are honoured that this Database is being launched by the SAARC Secretary General himself today. The Database is a demonstration of commitment and cooperation at the highest levels.

The South Asia region is not a homogeneously woven tapestry. It is a region of contrasts. On one hand there exists, in this region, a strong commitment for gender justice. Marked by great synergy and vibrancy of engagement among governments, parliamentarians, the women's movement, NGOs and the media. This is evident given the fact that Ministries of Women's Affairs have been strengthened and national policies and plans are in place for the advancement of women. There is increased compliance to CEDAW, and significant growth in judicial and legislative activism. The ratification of the SAARC Convention on trafficking and in the growing leadership of women at the local levels.

On the other hand, inequalities persist and perpetuate. Women largely continue to be excluded. Women are still on the fringes of development processes, and key decision making. This inequality and discrimination has led to massive socio-economic and human costs. According to the UN/ESCAP 2007 Survey, Gender discrimination costs the Asia Pacific region almost US\$80 billion per year.

With this submission, I would like to express my conviction that, Gender Equality is doable, with political commitment backed by appropriate resources. How could it be

otherwise when the process itself has been enriched with the engagement of such eminent people as those who are here today? How could it be otherwise? when there are millions of women, even in the remotest corners of the region, who are finding their meaning in life, the voice and intention to realize it? How can it be otherwise when there is a remarkable growth in the constituency of gender sensitive men?

On behalf of UNIFEM, I would like to once again express our heartfelt gratitude to the Honourable President of India for making time for us, to the Government of India, for the valued support, and my sincere thanks to each and every one of you, for being here today.