

Welcome Remarks
by Ms. Renuka Chowdhury, Honorable Minister
Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India

Respected Her Excellency President, Ministers, SAARC Secretary General, Chandniji, distinguished delegates, dear friends,

At the outset, I would like to wish you all a very happy new year and extend a very warm welcome to all of you who have gathered here for the 6th South Asia Regional Ministerial Meeting in New Delhi. This meeting gives us a platform to review the action taken and progress made by our Governments on the Beijing Platform for Action which has become a base document for measuring gender justice and women's empowerment. I would like to congratulate UNIFEM for having initiated the South Asia Regional Ministerial Conference in 1996, right after one year of the Beijing Conference in 1995 and continuing to hold this meeting after every two years. I am greatly honoured to be hosting this Meeting in India and extend my gratitude and thanks to Her Excellency President for taking out time from her busy schedule to inaugurate this meeting. This establishes the support that our Government is attaching to the important issue of gender equality. I feel pride in stating that we are one amongst the few countries to have a woman as the Head of the State.

UNIFEM is the women's fund at the United Nations, which was born out of the women's movement and champions the cause of women's empowerment and gender equality worldwide. We are very happy and privileged to have the UNIFEM South Asia Sub-regional office located in India.

Endorsed by 189 countries of the world at the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Beijing Platform for Action has been a defining development of our time towards gender equality. The Biennial Regional Review process innovatively facilitated by UNIFEM, since 1996 is an effort to keep the spirit and momentum of Beijing alive. The process also promotes accountability to the women of South Asia by tracking progress. It has been a collective journey of governments of the region, representatives of women's groups, the SAARC Secretariat and key regional institutions, who come together to assess progress, identify challenges and gaps and strategize for the future. Over the years, this unique mechanism has in addition, served to successfully facilitate cross regional peer learning and sharing of best practices. It has been able to effectively bring to the fore, key regional issues, which require priority attention, as well as strengthen regional collaboration and cooperation. I would really like to acknowledge and commend UNIFEM for its catalytic and progressive role it plays to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in South Asia, especially in India.

As we all know, the goals of human development are closely intertwined with development and empowerment of women, who, as an independent group constitute

almost 50% of the total population in most countries. They comprise not only the valuable human resources of the country but their socio economic development sets the pace for sustainable growth of the rest of the economy. As our Prime Minister Manmohan Singhji noted “India’s quest for freedom, dignity and self respect for all our citizens can never become a living reality unless our women are equal partners in all processes of development and governance”. Our Constitution guarantees equal rights for men and women and provides for positive discrimination in favour of women. India’s planning process is fully committed to enabling women to be equal partners in development.

Our government is committed to the cause of women. Gender equality has been a key guiding principle of the National Common Minimum Programme that our Government adopted in the year 2004 and a number of initiatives have been taken up since then to improve the status of women. The Common Minimum Programme has identified six basic principles for governance, one of which is to fully empower women politically, educationally, economically and legally.

One of the aims of our Government is also to make complete legal equality for women in all spheres a practical reality, especially by removing discriminatory legislations and by enacting new legislations. We have constituted an inter-ministerial Committee to look into this aspect. Some of our recent initiatives in this regard are the passing of a law to protect women from domestic violence, amending the Hindu Succession Act to give daughters equal right in ancestral property and initiating the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme reserving 30% of the employment created, for women through an act of parliament. The **Right to Information Act (RTI), 2005** was enacted to promote transparency and accountability in the working of any public authority. **The Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006** recognizes the need for vesting of rights over the forest and occupation in the forest lands with the schedule tribe people who are dwelling in the forest and other traditional forest dwellers who have been residing in such forest since generations. **Indian Penal Code and Criminal Procedure Code** have been amended to prohibit arrest of a women after sunset and before sunrise, make judicial enquiry mandatory in case of rape of a woman while in police custody etc.

My Ministry has launched two new schemes this year – **Ujjwala** for prevention of trafficking and rescue, rehabilitation, reintegration and repatriation of victims of trafficking and **Conditional Cash Transfer Scheme** which would act as an incentive for families to retain their daughters and thus arrest the increasing female foeticide in the country.

The real test of Government commitment is the allocation of financial resources for programmes for women’s empowerment. In India, in all state governments and Central Ministries, earmarking of at least 30 percent of all non- women specific developmental outlays exclusively for women in a sub-Plan known as Women’s Component Plan, wherever such disaggregating is possible, has given a tremendous fillip to gender mainstreaming initiatives. Additionally, India has also initiated measures for Gender

Budgeting. Its importance is being emphasized in the Indian Budgets since 2004-05. In the last three union budgets, an attempt has been made to categorize the allocation flowing to women into a two way statement – one which indicates 100% allocation for women and the other indicates 30% and above but not 100%. Separately the Outcome Budget has provision for reflecting gender outcomes. Gender audit has also been recently initiated.

Despite all our efforts to improve the status of women, the gender imbalances still continue. Such imbalances begin with the declining sex ratio, illiteracy and inadequate health care between girls and boys and culminates in the high rate of maternal mortality because of early marriages and poor health. Differentials in educational status and economic empowerment are heavily biased against women. The challenge before us is to bridge the gap between promise and performance and to ensure the advancement of women and genuine gender equality. There are no quick-fix solutions or ready-made answers, or a ‘one size fits all’ approach. ‘Gender mainstreaming’ and pursuit of a ‘rights-based approach’ have contributed substantially to the progress made towards achieving ‘gender equality’. However, gender equality still remains a distant dream in South Asia.

I am sure we will have very fruitful discussions and exchange of ideas during the deliberations over the three days of this conference. We also hope we will be able to come out with a declaration which will be adopted at the conclusion of the Conference. I also hope that one of the participating countries will come forward to agree to host the seventh meeting.

I would now request Her Excellency President to give her inaugural address.