



STATEMENT BY MRS. KANTI SINGH, MINISTER OF STATE FOR HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT, GOVERNMENT OF INDIA ON REVIEW OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION AND THE OUTCOME OF THE 23RD SPECIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY AND CURRENT CHALLENGES AND FORWARD-LOOKING STRATEGIES FOR THE ADVANCEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AND GIRLS [AGENDA ITEM 3©] IN THE 49TH SESSION COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN ON MARCH 2, 2005



**Madam Chairperson,
Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,**

My delegation extends to you its warm felicitations on your election as Chairperson of this significant session of the Commission on the Status on Women. We are confident of the success of this session under your guidance. I would like to assure you of my delegation's full cooperation in the deliberations and the work of this Commission.

We thank the Secretary-General for his statement to the Commission and for the detailed report under this agenda item.

We associate ourselves with the statement made by the distinguished representative of Jamaica in her capacity as Chair of the Group of 77.

Madam Chair,

The adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 signified the maturation of women's quest for dignity and equality that had spanned all continents. Rights of women, empowerment of women, gender equality, mainstreaming gender and elimination of discrimination against women became the accepted norms by which women's development was to be assessed in the future.

This session of the Commission is of particular significance as we take stock of the progress made in achieving the goals and commitments undertaken and obstacles and challenges encountered in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, ten years after its adoption.

The Secretary-General's review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome of the 23rd special session of the General Assembly indicates an increased awareness of gender equality among Governments and different parts of society. It reports significant but uneven national achievements in relation to the implementation of these outcomes. Increased participation of women in the economy, progress in elimination of discrimination, and achievements in women's health and education have been some notable positive developments.

As the first country to adopt the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action without reservations, India has been fully committed to its implementation.

In India, initiatives to address the situation of women were already under way when the 4th World Conference was held. The National Commission for Women had been set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. However, the most far-reaching and influential measures adopted in India were the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India in 1993 which provided for reservation for women of one-third of all seats, including its Chairs, in the local village and municipal bodies, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels. In a quiet but powerful revolution, and in an exercise of not only their political and civil rights, but also one that affects economic, social and cultural rights, more than one million women now occupy positions as members and chairpersons of local bodies. As a single act of empowering women, this has no known parallel in history.

Education, training and self-employment strategies are playing a crucial role in the emancipation of women from traditional dependencies. Over the past decade, women have become more vocal and assertive and have now emerged as articulate, motivated leaders all over the country. Sustained training and networking efforts are being undertaken to ensure that capacity of the elected women representatives to participate improves.

Another development that merits special mention is the progress made in the last few years to reduce the gender gap in enrolment and retention at the school level. Through concerted efforts, female literacy has grown significantly from 39.3 per cent in 1991 to 53.7 per cent in 2001 and the gender gap has narrowed from 25 per cent to 21 per cent. The focus is now on improving women's participation in higher education, technical education and vocational courses.

Legal protection through the progressive development and strengthening of national laws, as also elimination of discrimination against women through policy measures, such as the National Policy for Empowerment of Women adopted in 2001 as a follow-up action to the commitments adopted in the Beijing Declaration and Plan of Action, have been a vital part of India's efforts to combat practices contrary to the human rights of women and to change social attitudes on which discriminatory practices have been based. These measures are sought to be strengthened further by the new Government through its Common Minimum Programme which strives to ensure the laws be made more women friendly and enhance the economic empowerment of women through equal rights of ownership of assets such as land/shelter, promotion of access by 'self-help' groups to micro-finance are important elements.

Madam Chair,

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. Presenting the country's budget only two days ago, the Finance Minister indicated that "this is another first in budget-making in India in course of time, all Departments will be required to present gender budgets...". This is an important development for the 496 million women in India who represent 48.3 per cent of the country's total population.

India's legislative framework is supported by an active and alert judiciary which has infused dynamism into safeguarding and upholding the constitutional and legal provisions, and has issued directives to the State from time to time to further safeguard and strengthen the rights of women. In addition, independent institutions - the National Human Rights Commission and the National Commission for Women - are actively engaged in protecting the legal and constitutional safeguards provided for women.

We in India are fortunate that in our democracy, a strong women's movement and a widespread network of non-government organisations which have robust grass-roots presence and deep insight into women's concerns, have inspired many initiatives for the empowerment of women and have been critical in the march towards women's equality.

Madam Chair,

Notwithstanding the normative and legal advances over the last several decades, the evolution of the issue of human rights of women, and the incontestable social progress and economic advancement, the gap between de jure and de facto equality continues to endure in much of the world. This is as true for India as any other part of the world.

The World Bank, in a report entitled *Engendering Development through Gender Equality* indicated that:

- In no region do women and men have equal rights. In a number of countries women still lack independent rights to own land, manage property, conduct business, or even travel without their husbands' consent.
- Women continue to have systematically poorer command over a range of productive resources, including land, information, and financial resources.
- Despite considerable increases in women's education relative to men, women continue to have limited opportunities and earn less than men in the labor market - even when they have the same education and work experience as men.
- Women remain vastly underrepresented in politics and policymaking. They hold less than 10 percent of the seats in parliaments in most regions and less than 8 percent of government ministerial positions.

Madam Chair,

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, available studies point to the fact that gender equality has been least possible where resources are scarce – in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

It is imperative that the international community recognise the co-relation and take measures, including through enhanced cooperation and provision of necessary resources so that commitments undertaken in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and at the 23rd special session of the General Assembly can be realised by all member States.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

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