

KINGDOM OF BHUTAN

Statement by

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Permanent Representative of Bhutan to the United Nations and

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at the

23rd Special Session of the General Assembly entitled

Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace

for the Twenty-first Century

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Mr. President,

Allow me to congratulate you on your assumption of the Presidency of this Special Session. We are confident that with your vast experience, able leadership and innate wisdom, you will guide our deliberations to a successful conclusion.

We are gathered here to review and assess the progress in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, and to propose further initiatives for gender equality, development and peace in the 21st century. In this connection, my delegation commends the laudable work done by the Commission on the Status of Women, which also undertook the arduous task of the Preparatory Committee for this Special Session.

Mr. President,

Though we have seen progress on all the twelve critical areas of concern since Beijing, there is still much more that needs to be done to fulfill our pledges to achieve gender equality.

Among our topmost priority is the need to take concerted action to eliminate violence against women in all its forms, whether it be domestic violence, rape, trafficking in women and children, violence in armed conflict, female infanticide, female genital mutilation and other cruel practices. Trafficking and exploitation of women and children generally take place from areas of poverty to areas of prosperity, whether in the national or international context. This is something, which our whole being rebels against and on which there is agreement within the international community to take action to end such practices. However, adequate political will and resources for urgent initiatives are seriously lacking. My delegation calls for immediate and effective measures by governments, the international community, the United Nations and civil society, to put an end to such practices.

Mr. President,

In our region of South Asia, the SAARC member countries have taken a number of initiatives to meet the daunting challenges of gender inequality, specially to combat violence against women and the serious threats faced by the girl child. The Girl Child has in fact, been at the center of SAARC's initiatives. SAARC declared the year 1990 as the Year of the Girl Child and the decade 1991 to 2000 as the Decade of the Girl Child. Also

notable is the, consensus to adopt a Convention to Combat the Crime of Trafficking in Women and Children, which has been finalized for adoption at the next SAARC Summit.

Mr. President,

In Bhutan, by tradition and culture, women have always been equal partners in our society. By law, there is equality between the sexes, especially in matters relating to family, inheritance, marriage and divorce. There is no discrimination on the basis of gender.

Despite this situation, during the past decade, the Royal Government and the National Assembly of Bhutan have made conscious efforts to ensure that there are no provisions that could or may adversely affect the female gender in our laws, rules and regulations. Any element that could be construed as being discriminatory or that affected women adversely, if found, were revised, to ensure equality as well as to take care of the special needs of women. For example, the Marriage Act of 1980 was amended by the National Assembly in 1996, so as to ensure that women and children received absolutely just treatment when it came to any situation relating to marriage and divorce. Legal provisions have also been formulated to deal with any form of discrimination against women in various employment situations.

As far as health, education and economic opportunities are concerned, male and female are on an equal footing. In fact, about 50% of the school going children are now female, which is in keeping with the male:female population ratio. To further meet basic educational needs, the government has established adult and non-formal education centers throughout the country. Up to 80% of the beneficiaries in these centers happen to be women. Likewise, in the health sector, with the Royal Government's commitment towards accomplishing the goal of Health for All, very significant reductions have been registered in infant and maternal mortality rates within the last decade.

Another positive development has been the increasing participation of women in professions, which hitherto were considered male domains. As a consequence, today we have women in our defense, and law and order services. There are also women in the judiciary, the legislature and at practically all decision-making levels.

In conclusion, Mr. President, even though we have made substantial progress towards achieving gender equality, our efforts to further enhance the involvement of women in all walks of national life continues. Bhutan is firmly committed to the pledges we made at Beijing.

Thank you.