

**Keynote Address by Engr. Dr. M. Akram Sheikh,
Minster of State/Deputy Chairman
Planning Commission**

**Dissemination Workshop on
Pakistan Country Gender Assessment Report 2005
4 May 2006**

Mr. John Wall,, Dr. Tara Wishwanath.....

Secretary Women Development (Sohail Safdar); Dr. Pervez Tahir,

Dr. Zehba Sattar, Distinguished participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to address this gathering of our development partners, government policy makers, representation of civil society organizations and academia on the occasion of launching of Country Gender Assessment Report. I extend my appreciation to the eminent professional speakers and guests from the international agencies for giving us an opportunity to learn from their valuable experiences.

Ladies and Gentlemen, issues of gender equity and empowerment pervade all societies and cultures; further, the pace of change and reform is generally very slow and diverse everywhere. The *UNDP Human Development Report of 1995* showed that in no society do women enjoy the same opportunities as men. It also demonstrated that successful initiatives for removing gender inequalities do not depend on the wealth of nations. Moreover, differences by sector are significant in

all countries, as pointed out by another UNDP report in 2000¹. Sweden had the highest percentage of women in parliament (44 per cent), but less than 10 per cent of women in senior academic positions, while in Egypt women constitute less than 2 per cent of Parliament, but over 40 per cent of senior academic staff. I mention these figures to emphasise that equality for women may translate into different numbers in different societies, within the basic premise of access, protection and empowerment, and this fact must be recognised when looking for solutions or comparing outcomes.

Ladies and Gentlemen: Pakistan is committed to realising the full potential of *all* its citizens, for development with equity, without which development can neither be balanced nor sustainable. Since women are generally more disadvantaged than men, it is but natural for Pakistan to attempt to eliminate discrimination against them and to provide affirmative action for their empowerment. One must, however, recognise the constraints and 'work around them' as recognised in your Gender Assessment Report of 2005.

Let me therefore dilate briefly on some of the issues confronting Pakistan and the policy measures taken, many of which have also been touched in the World Bank Report being discussed today.

Upon signing the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, Pakistan formally committed itself to mainstreaming gender perspectives throughout its policy and planning processes as a means to achieving gender equality in interventions. This approach is well exemplified by the

¹ *Women's Political Participation and Good Governance*, UNDP, 2000

Prime Minister's Foreword to the Medium Term Development Framework, 2005 where he stated: "Economic growth does not automatically translate into poverty reduction and equitable distribution among persons, genders, ethnicities and regions. *Growth will be made pro-poor by result oriented investments in women empowerment...*". Bettering the quality of lives of women is therefore the bedrock on which national poverty alleviation strategies are based. I assure you that the MTF 2005-10 does address the key challenges directly and indirectly.

Even though considerable improvements have taken place in the status of women at legal, cultural, economic, and political levels, the gap between desired outcomes and actual practice continues to be a cause of concern. Female enrolment is increasing faster than that of boys in all areas of the country, but participation rates are still less than optimum and gender gaps persist. The gender gap is fortunately almost closed in urban primary schools and getting better in rural areas where female education is much sought after. Even in a conservative area such as FATA, *co-educational* schools have become popular after it was decided to have only female teachers. Based on the success of this model, it has now been decided to convert all primary schools to co-educational schools with all-female teaching staff. While the provision of nutritional supplements has proved an attractive incentive for increasing enrolment in rural areas, the shortage of trained teachers is a serious obstacle to the success of the programmes.

Similarly, the health of the girl-child and the mother are major parts of the MDGs, and appropriate emphasis is placed on provision of trained

paramedics. Maternal mortality rate remains a problem and we plan to give it the priority that it has been denied so far.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me now touch briefly on legal matters. The Family Laws of 1961 and subsequent amendments offer a good degree of protection to women, yet their knowledge is not widespread, and implementation is generally overlooked. Even in many highly educated families, not many young people have read the Nikah-nama, which offers the bride considerable protection and rights. We look forward to the deliberations of the National Commission on the status of Women to make further progress in the matters of law.

The same applies to laws of inheritance, which have been so forcefully enunciated and reinforced in Islamic Law. However, in the rapid societal transformations taking place in Pakistan, the security offered by the family or extended clan, within the traditional social values, is often traded in for an uncertain process and dispensation of justice and rights. Here civil society has played and will continue to play a major role.

Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to talk about some recent government initiatives. One dimension of *political* empowerment is the representation of women in National and Provincial Assemblies as well as local bodies. This has been achieved ahead of the MDGs deadline of 2015, because of the personal commitment and interest of President Pervez Musharraf. The National Programme for Women's Political Participation, launched in 2002 for the period 2002 to 2008 provides a holistic and integrated approach to promote women's full and equal

participation in decision-making in all political structures and processes, at all levels of governance. In partnership with civil society, the programme expects to develop a unified strategy for promoting women's political participation at all levels of governance, public awareness and support for women's increased participation in policies, and capacity building of women.

Other initiatives include the National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women (NPDEW) enunciated in March 2002, and the development of Gender Management Information System (GMIS) which on completion will facilitate Ministry of Women Development to plan strategic interventions based on the gaps identified in gender-disaggregated data generated through the GMIS. Our flag ship programme is the Gender Reform Action Programme (GRAP).

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to invite your attention to an important change that has taken place in public sector policy over the last few years. The state has become more appreciative of the inputs of 'non state' actors in infrastructure, technical advice and capacity building and advocacy, on human rights, not limited to economic issues or government agendas, and there is a general shift towards *working with* non governmental organizations which are able to mobilise communities faster, and bridge important gaps. As these have grown in numbers and the sectors they address, their operational structures have also formalized, and they are no longer informal organizations, running *ad hoc* campaigns on local or international development issues. These are self-governing institutions, which operate on philanthropic support, not motives for profit making. The constituents are the citizens (partners

or beneficiaries). The levels of financial support, which can be accessed by these organizations from a wide variety of sources, has increased. With NGOs role becoming larger as development players, there is also a growing concern among donors, individuals and the public sector on the subject of accountability and credibility. These concerns have also come from within the non-governmental sector itself.

Ladies and gentlemen, we do wish to modernise, but we hesitate to be Westernised, if it requires us to sacrifice our traditional wisdom and values. I am reminded here of a current debate in the USA about the “care crisis”, where the discourse revolves upon the great burden placed upon working mothers, who are supposed to spend time outside their homes and suffer the guilt of not being able to care for the child. For four decades, working women have poured into the paid labour force. Yet American society has done precious little to restructure the workplace or family life. The result? Working mothers are burdened and exhausted, families are fractured, and children are often neglected. The case of harassment of women in the workplace has multiplied all over the world, as has violence against women. In Pakistan, the number of girls going to universities and professional colleges has reached a new high, and unpleasant but previously hidden facets of injustice and other crimes against women are now being reported freely. This is a welcome change.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have undertaken a series of policies and reforms aimed at fostering gender equality in the country in all its manifestations. Our

basic strategic direction will remain equity and balanced empowerment. Access to, and affordability, of education and health services to females, and increasing employment opportunities, will remain crucial in meeting gender related MDGs. We will further ensure that macroeconomic policies are engendered and adequate budgetary allocations are earmarked for health, education and social support systems.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I agree with John Wall that there is a huge, unutilized human resource embodied in our women. Investing in this resource has the greatest returns. The Medium Term Development Framework 2005-10 recognises this and Vision 2030 will focus on this in full measure. The gaps highlighted by Dr. Tara Wishwanath in various sectors are already on our radar screen. We have set up 6 high-level groups to support the preparation of Vision 2030. These groups will suggest strategies, policies and programmes to overcome these gaps.

I conclude by noting that there is general concurrence between the perceptions of the government and the very useful report prepared by the World Bank. I am further heartened by the realistic and practical approach, that conversion to a fully gender balanced and empowered society is a slow process, requiring careful but persistent sensitisation of society. This process will flourish within a wider environment of continued government interventions and activism by civil society.

The deliberations today will not only strengthen our resolve and commitment, but will also help improve our interventions. I look forward to your recommendations.

Finally I take this opportunity to thank the World Bank and other partners in the development for extending valuable input and support to such important activities of gender assessment and mainstreaming. I assure you that the Planning Commission and other organs of the government remain committed to the success of the Governments deep rooted initiatives. This gives me confidence that it will add momentum to the national level efforts to attain just, equitable and sustainable development, as envisaged in our Vision 2030.

In the end I wish you successful deliberations and express my sincere thanks to all participants.