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Excellencies, distinguished guests,

I am deeply honoured to have been asked to make this keynote address on this day of immense significance, a day in which we celebrate and honour our grandmothers, our mothers, our sisters, our wives, our daughters. For me, as a man, it is an even greater honour to speak to you on the occasion of International Women's Day 2009.

This is a day to celebrate, to commemorate those unsung heroes and heroines who by their passion and commitment and drive, declared this day a day to be set aside to stop, look back – in order to look forward -- and gauge what progress we, as a community of nations, have made towards advancing women's rights. More importantly we mark International Women's Day to renew and reinvigorate our commitment to change

Women are the bedrock of families – the bearers and carers of the most treasured heritage of all humankind – our children. Women are the bedrock of communities and nations; progress of women in society, their health, their rights, leads as naturally as day does to night, to the progress of nations. You simply cannot have progress in nations without progress for women.

And today we have cause to celebrate

We have come a long way and there is some cause to celebrate – cautiously, quietly.

It is undeniable that progress towards women's status in society, and fundamentally their, health and rights have been made. Women in my region of South Asia – a region of great paradoxes -- have been truly amazing, surging forward bearing, the torch as icons of democracy, as powerful agents of change, taking up leadership roles as presidents, prime ministers, parliamentarians and heads of private sector companies, where their husbands and fathers have left off.

Around the world, women are treated more fairly than in the past – they are getting more equal incomes, better jobs, and better care. Even in South Asia if you go to any classroom in any part of the region, you will find significantly more girls in school today than their during their mothers' time and phenomenally more than in their grandmothers' time. Just take Afghanistan in 1999 only 7 percent of girls enrolled into primary education, in 2006 that figure had shot up to 36 percent – still too little, but a major increase.

From Kabul to Colombo, Kolkatta to Karachi more women are giving birth with the help of trained midwives, in institutions that are safer and more hygienic than ever before. Today, if a woman is a victim of any form of violence she has a greater chance of being heard and of getting the law on her side, than her mother or grandmother who had to put up with such violence as part of the misfortune of her sex. Today more women have the right to decide over their own bodies – when to get married, when to have a child, when not to; and more women have the chance of getting an education. Even more heartening, in India today, anyone can take up a case of violence against women on behalf of that female victim.

Recently Nepal and Bhutan have joined other nations in South Asia to make marital rape a crime. In India and Bangladesh, specially trained police teams have been set up to deal with cases of violence against women, giving them privacy and assuring confidentiality.

A long, long way ahead

So we have come some way but fundamentally there is still a long, long way to go. Let us not for a minute think that this progress has been satisfactory and that this progress will naturally evolve of its own accord. It will not and cannot without continued and clear commitment.

In fact in certain parts of South Asia progress for women is under serious threat of being eroded.

I cannot pretend to know as a man what it is like to suffer constant discrimination, constant violence quite literally from womb to tomb, from cradle to grave, simply for being born female. Personally for me, there is nothing more spine-chilling than the violence dealt girls, even her birth. Female foeticide, or the murder of the baby girl, has, in some Indian states

grown to such an extent that doctors believe that 2 million female foetices are killed every year due to sex selection. The gender balance is skewed to such an extent that some reliable media sources estimate that there are some 50 million females now missing in the Indian population.

This violence continues throughout the life cycle of far too many women. It takes many and varied forms. It kills and maims in horrifying numbers and it is not unique to the developing world.

Violence of a different kind

But violence against girls takes other, more insidious forms too. I have mentioned already that South Asia is a region of extreme paradoxes and cruel contradictions. This is a region where women have soared to great heights – are amongst the world's leading intellectuals, writers and thinkers, engineers and artists. Yet nearly half of all women in South Asia are illiterate.

Denial of education based on gender, is a form of violence against women.

Child marriages

South Asia has the highest percentage of child marriages in the world, nearly half of all women between the ages of 20 and 24 were married before they turned 18. Early marriage leads to early motherhood and early motherhood can lead to the early death of baby and mother. When children themselves have children, their own risk of dying during childbirth and the babies' risk of dying, shoots up. Young mothers are less likely to be educated, to suffer great physical pain and poor health from multiple births because their bodies are not fully developed. They are also much more likely to become victims of domestic violence.

Child marriage is violence against women.

Laws letting women down.

Globally, legislation has vastly improved. But despite better laws to protect women, the incidence of crime and violence against women has sadly been on the rise. This could mean that today women feel more protected and empowered to report these cases, so more are doing so. That is, of course a good thing.

But perhaps more astonishing than the scale and depth of violence against women, is that even in the best of cases – for example, India where major reform has taken place -- less than 10 percentage of all rape cases are convicted in courts and 74 % of judges believed that family honour was more important than violence against women.

Violence against women is a human rights issue.

South Asia and brutality targeting women

The World Bank estimates that violence against women is as serious a cause of death and incapacity among women of reproductive age, as cancer and a major cause of ill-health – greater even than traffic accidents and malaria combined.

There can be nowhere on earth where women suffer so much from these deeply harmful traditional practices than South Asia – dowry-related deaths or being disfigured by acid thrown in their faces by rejected suitors, or potential marriage partners in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

Across the region, crimes against women are on the increase – from torture to rape to sexual harassment and dowry killings. Dowry killings are somewhat unique to South Asia. This is where brides are killed by the husband's family because her family did not pay enough for the bride price. Despite a ban in many countries, this practice continues to this day and is a deeply harmful social evil.

These are learned patterns of behaviour – boys see their fathers, their uncles, carrying this out and they do it – It is about acceptance and power and domination.

Change through education

Change must come early and has to come through education.

Armed with this knowledge, UNICEF has made girls' education a fundamental cornerstone of its work on the elimination of gender-based violence. UNICEF will continue our major investment in girls' education. But girls' education is under threat in many areas of South Asia. In just the past year, in the SWAT region of north west Pakistan, 180 girls' schools have been forced to close due to attacks; and in Afghanistan the progress made in

the past several years is being rapidly eroded as girls are increasing too frightened to attend school in their villages. Girls' education has been forced underground as female teachers and girl students have been attacked. Girls who dream of becoming doctors, nurses, and teachers have had to forget those dreams.

Ultimately, we must all increase our support for girls' education. If we are to truly honour women as we do today; if we are to ensure their dreams are not shattered, their bodies not battered, we must demonstrate political commitment equal to that harnessed to halt devastating illnesses such as smallpox or polio.

"Today's theme is "Men and Women united to end Violence against women.". Clearly we can only do this together.

Women know what is wrong.

Women know that violence -- the daily, persistent and terrible violence against them -- is also against their rights. But in many countries (including in south Asia), men still control the resources, decisions and power that it takes to make change.

Therefore we must unite to end violence if we are to make change -- women cannot do this alone. We must invest in women, their education, in real access to decision making. We must unite to stop all forms of violence against women. This will be a first important step (but only one of many needed steps) in the full realization of their rights.

We owe that to our grandmothers, our mothers, our sisters and our daughters. Then we will truly honor them this international womens day.

Thank you.

ENDS