Women’s Empowerment, Sustainable Development and the Role of Men

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On Friday, April 10th, we celebrated Iranian’s Women’s Day – to coincide with birthday of Hazrat-e Fatemeh Zahra whose life and lifestyle are revered through – and beyond – the world of Islam.

Today, we are gathered to commemorate this special occasion.

This year, the United Nation’s specific message for women is, “Empower Women, Empower Humanity – Picture It!”

This year we also commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995.

The Beijing Declaration remains one of the world’s most powerful blueprints for empowering women.

Since that historic gathering in Beijing there has been increasing recognition that gender equality is not only women’s universal right and entitlement but it is also a precondition for global development, justice and peace.

For if women and girls are not able to fully realize their rights and aspirations in all spheres of life, all these things will be impeded.

Twenty years after Beijing, we can see both progress – and persistent challenges – throughout the world in the 12 areas of critical concern which the Beijing Platform for Action lays out. Some of the most important progress has been in:

- **Education:** In many countries gender parity has been achieved in education enrollment across all levels. Yet this educational attainment does not translate immediately into equal opportunities in the labour force – or in the economy – or in the political process.

- **Political Process:** For example, while we have seen more women elected to public office across the world we are still far from parity. The global average of women in parliament is only 22%.
o **Work Force:** In the work force, more women than ever before are participating, but everywhere women generally earn less than men. Many remain in sectors that are the lowest paid – with little social security or labour protection.¹

o **Violence against Women:** It is true that more laws and policies now exist to respond to and eliminate violence against women. Still, sexual and gender-based violence continue to occur on every continent and in every country, often reaching horrific levels where there is conflict and displacement. The plain fact is that across the planet our laws are under-implemented. And the resulting impunity continues to render vulnerable women’s bodies to such violations.

**IRAN**

- Like many other countries, the Islamic Republic of Iran has made significant progress in promoting women’s empowerment – particularly in education and health.

- However, according to UNDP’s Gender Inequality Index, many other middle income countries outrank Iran in terms of women’s empowerment.

- The UNDP index looks at five variables for women’s empowerment:
  - maternal mortality,
  - adolescent birth rate,
  - level of secondary education among girls,
  - the number of seats in parliament held by females, and
  - female participation in the labour market.

- According to UNDP, Iran does well in the first three of these categories. But there are still challenges in the other two areas.

- And here I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Iran on recently securing – by ballot – a seat in the Governing Board of the UN

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¹ In rich and poor countries alike, women also carry out a disproportionate burden of the unpaid care work. Unpaid care work – along with unpaid work in the family business – often prevents women from being able to work in paid employment. Or gain new skills. Or participate in public life. Or have time to ever relax and take rest.
Agency for Women for a three-year term starting in January 2016. UN Women, which was created by the United Nations in 2010, is our body which promotes gender equality and empowerment of women.

- So we look to inspiring examples – like the women present here today – who stand as shining symbols of what women can accomplish.

- Women who have had a goal and have realized their dreams. Women who courageously empower themselves, and – through their example – inspire others to contribute to their own development, and the development of their families and their communities.

- The lesson is clear: by empowering women as agents of change and leaders in the development processes which shape our lives, we can contribute to a more inclusive world. A more resilient world. A more developed world.

- But women should not have to make these changes by themselves alone. And this is my central message today. Men and boys must play a much greater role.

- This is also the central message of the #HeForShe Campaign launched at the United Nations, on 20 September, 2014.

- This initiative calls on men and boys to become partners. To realize a shared vision of gender empowerment that will benefit all of humanity.

- The #HeForShe campaign asks men and boys to accept their responsibility at home. In the workplace. In the community. And create a world where women have:
  - More voice
  - More choice
  - More safety
• So, as we celebrate Women in Iran today and as we recognize these remarkable women in the audience – and their work – I would like to leave you with the words of another young woman.

• Her name is Malala Yusufzai – world’s youngest Nobel laureate. And this name is known throughout the world for both immense bravery and the promotion of women’s empowerment through education.

• Malala dreams of education for all. She is actively pursuing her goal. Women all over the planet, and not just here in Iran, can follow their dreams and do the same.

• Here are Malala’s words: “Let us make our future now, and let us make our dreams tomorrow’s reality.”

• Thank you – and Happy Iranian Women’s Day!