

**Opening Address by
Minister of State for Gender Equality and Social Affairs of Japan
Kuniko INOBUCHI, Ph.D.
at Opening Session of the
East Asia Gender Equality Ministerial Meeting
Tokyo, 30 June – 1 July 2006**

Honorable Ministerial Colleagues,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Introduction

I would like to welcome you all to this East Asia Gender Equality Ministerial Meeting. This unique forum brings together Ministers and representatives of the national gender machineries of 16 countries in the region and of two international organizations. This is the first East Asia ministerial-level meeting, aimed to discuss the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women in this region.

We all believe in gender equality and so does the international community. Gender equality and the empowerment of women are global norms. However, I am sure all of you would agree that translating such global commitments into national action is not an easy task. It is particularly so in case of gender because it is deeply associated with traditional values and social norms. Among the countries represented here today, we experience similar constraints in this respect. We are at the forefront of a big challenge - of bridging the international and grass-roots communities, in other words, of ensuring global commitments do bring impact on the lives of every woman and man.

We organized this Meeting as a way to promote dialogue amongst ourselves, who take leadership in making gender equality a reality. I advocate strongly that such dialogue take place at the regional level – for the three main reasons:

Firstly to learn from each other how we promote global goals in the national contexts and mainstream gender in our national context. There is so much to share ;

Secondly to launch partnerships for addressing gender issues that require close and effective regional collaboration;

Thirdly to put in place a regional gateway to connect with the global community, through

which we disseminate our regional experience widely to the international community, in particular using the UN machineries such as the Commission on the Status of Women.

This Meeting is therefore designed to launch and promote a regional process to discuss challenges, share good practices and lessons-learned, and explore concrete solutions, particularly for the issues best addressed through regional cooperation.

Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women as Global Commitments

Now, let me share with you some thoughts on the very issue of gender equality and the empowerment of women, just to give you an over-arching framework.

Gender equality is just, right, and fair. It is a goal in its own right. Gender equality lies at the core of social justice and democracy. It is about respecting the rights of half the humanity and ensuring that their voices are heard.

Numerous international conventions and conferences promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, in particular the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration.

Gender equality is also a key element of the Millennium Declaration, which was adopted by leaders of 189 nations in September 2000. It was later translated into time-bound and numerical Millennium Development Goals, known as the MDGs. Of the eight goals, the Goal 3 specifically aims to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women. While this is an urgent necessity in itself, it is also clear that gender equality and the empowerment women are the vehicles of achieving all other goals. If half of the population is neglected or not fully targeted in the process of addressing human poverty, we cannot even pretend to say that we have made efforts.

Most recently, at the World Summit held in September 2005 in New York, the international community reviewed the progress made so far towards the MDGs. It was reiterated in the resolution that “progress for women is progress for all.” We all know, however, there still is a long way. Challenges are still enormous.

Women still represent the majority of the poor population. In Asia, according to the UN Millennium Project Report published in 2005, 65 % of the informal workers are women – in case of India, the figure goes up to 86%. Women make up almost 50% of the HIV-infected population. The report also points out that only 14 countries, worldwide, have met the Beijing Platform for Action target of 30% of seats held by women – unfortunately, not a single Asian

country is represented in this successful group. These numbers tell us very strongly that women are faced with more burdens and constraints than men do. They also tell us there is scope for concerted regional efforts.

We are not here today to justify gender equality and the empowerment of women. As I said earlier, we gathered here today to discuss how best to translate these commitments into concrete action. Global commitments are in vain if they do not make real impact on the lives of women and men on the ground.

I am sure all of you would agree that gender mainstreaming is not a simple process – it is about social transformation, transformation particularly of the so-called “mainstream.” It takes time. However, with the strong political will and leadership, adequate capacities and resources, and strategic partnerships in place, it is certainly achievable.

We are all in the process of learning. That is why I am pleased to be hosting this meeting – in the course of the next two days: we will take stock of what has been done, share good practices, and explore the way forward. At the end of the Meeting, we will have a regional process taking off on the ground.

Turning Global Commitments into Real Action: Need for Regional Process

Why the regional process? Let me now elaborate on the rationale of this Meeting. In order to make gender equality a reality, we need interventions at different levels – global, national, and grass-roots levels:

At the global level, goals are shaped - we have key international conventions and action agenda for promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women. These commitments, of course, are not created for the sake of rhetoric but are aimed for making tangible impact on women and men all around the world.

At the national level, we, the government, are responsible for translating the internationally-agreed norms into national policies, institutions, and programmes. Our role is to ensure that gender equality becomes an integral part of all of our policies and programmes at national and local levels as well as of society as a whole.

Then at the grass-roots level, civil society actors and people will bring in changes in real terms. They are the active agents in transforming norms and practicing them in life– in communities and households. This is how we promote gender equality.

We, as national government, are struggling to put global norms and commitments into national contexts – particularly in cultural and social terms. National situations are different in each country but there are common aspects in this region – particularly challenges and constraints in moving gender agenda forward.

I therefore would like to suggest to you that we launch a regional dialogue process to share information, good practices and lessons-learned in mainstreaming gender in similar social and cultural contexts. The regional process can also help identify ways to collectively respond to emerging gender-related problems, such as human trafficking, HIV/AIDS and natural disasters that are trans-boundary and thus require close collaboration within the region.

Global, regional, national, and grass-roots. They are all mutually-linked and they reinforce each other. I believe that the regional platform and cooperation will add enormous value to what is already being done at other levels.

Efforts Made by Japan

I now would like to explain to you how Japan is committed to this issue – both in our own society and in the context of international cooperation. I will not go into details as I will share with you more in the next session but I would like to give you a snapshot of the progress and efforts being made by Japan.

Promotion of gender equality is an integral part of the structural reform being carried by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. In this connection, in October of last year, Prime Minister Koizumi appointed me to Minister of State for Gender Equality and Social Affairs, the first ministerial post to deal exclusively with these issues.

As a result of the general election that took place in September 2005, there are now an unprecedented number of female members of the House of Representatives – forty-three (43), an increase of twenty-six (26) percent. While women's participation in society is growing and more women are involved in decision-making processes, the proportion of the whole they represent remains unsatisfactory. Japan therefore will continue to vigorously promote gender equality and undertake reforms to create a fair society in which both men and women can fully exercise their capacity to achieve self-fulfillment.

We are also committed to engendering the Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA). At the 49th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women held in March 2005 in New York, the Government of Japan launched the Initiative on Gender and Development, which is now serving as a key gender policy for ODA. As we meet here today, however, we

all know that putting in place a gender policy is not enough – what truly counts is concrete action. We will therefore continue our efforts for implementing the policy and mainstreaming gender perspectives into all of our ODA activities. Gender mainstreaming, to me, is a strategic and efficient way to contribute to the achievement of poverty reduction and thus the MDGs.

We will also continue to support developing countries in this area through technical cooperation by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) as well as through partnerships with international organizations.

Conclusion

Over the next two days, I would like to encourage all of you to actively participate in this unique dialogue. You yourself are an extraordinary source of inspiration and innovations. Sharing of knowledge and wisdom will help us move forward.

I personally look forward very much to engaging myself in this regional learning process. I also would like to share the conclusions we reach at the end of the Meeting with the international community as an innovative example of what can be done at the regional level.

Thank you very much.