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East Asia Ministerial Meeting on Gender Equality: Opening Statement from New Zealand

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Rau rangatira mā, tēnei te mihi ki a koutou i runga i te kaupapa o te rā – mana wahine.
Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā ra tātou katoa.

All participating countries have been asked to give a prepared statement

Thank you Dr Kuniko Inoguchi¹ for this invitation to New Zealand to join in what is not only an important and significant meeting on Gender Equality, but the first of its kind in the East Asia and Pacific region. I am honoured to be involved in such a historic step in working towards gender equality in the region. A conference such as this reaffirms the progress that was envisioned at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, which gave rise to the Beijing Platform for Action.

I would like to acknowledge the tremendous strides made in human and economic development, and in poverty reduction in the East Asia and Pacific region. East Asia's efforts to reduce gender inequality and to promote development have resulted in dramatic improvements in the health and education of women over the last 40 years.² Improvements in education, employment rates and health reflect the investment made by this region and its commitment to equality for all. The enactment of laws covering issues like land ownership, labour participation and violence, together with institutional reforms and policy for mainstreaming gender are the foundations for a path towards prosperity and improved quality of life for the region as a whole.

¹ Minister of State for Gender Equality and Social Affairs

Challenges still remain, however, some of which we will discuss as part of this meeting. Maternal mortality rates are still extraordinarily high in some countries in the area, gender-based violence is at epidemic levels and the trafficking of women and girls in the East Asia and Pacific region represents around a third of the global trafficking trade.³

As a member of the East Asia and Pacific region, we too face our own challenges, which I will come to shortly. In saying this though, we have learnt valuable lessons, developed successful strategies and made huge steps towards gender equality in our government policy and legislation. I feel fortunate to have benefited from the work of those before me in this area, and am inspired by them to work towards the day when we can say women in New Zealand have achieved equality in all aspects of their lives. I look forward to sharing those successes and challenges with you over the next two days but will firstly provide you with a picture of where we currently stand.

New Zealand has a strong policy and legal framework in place to protect women's rights – a Ministry of Women's Affairs was established just over 20 years ago to ensure the women of New Zealand have a strong voice in Cabinet and that government considers the impact on women whenever it is developing new policies or programmes.

To help this happen, my government developed an Action Plan for New Zealand Women, which sets out what the government is doing to improve the lives of New Zealand women over a five-year period.

The plan identifies three key areas of action for women:

- economic sustainability – which at its core is about having enough income to care for ourselves and our families
- work-life balance, and
- preserving our health and well-being.

² *Gender Equality in East Asia*, East Asia Update, P60

³ Social Development in East Asia and Pacific, <http://web.worldbank.org>

These are real issues facing all New Zealand women and I want to give some concrete examples of what is being done in each area, to give you an idea of what the Plan is delivering.

The first focus of the Plan is economic sustainability. Examples of initiatives that come under this part of the Plan include the Working for Families package, which provides financial support for families and moves to ensure women receive equal pay for equal work.

The government is taking some very practical steps to ensure that women working in the state sector are treated equally in employment. Government itself is undertaking pay and employment equity reviews across the public service and the public health and education sectors. Reducing occupational segregation is another challenge in the area of employment.

The second focus of the Action Plan for New Zealand Women is helping New Zealanders achieve balance in their lives, particularly between paid employment and their family lives. An example of government action in this area is the decision to extend the period of paid parental leave from 12 to 14 weeks and to include self-employed women.

Measures to improve the accessibility and affordability of childcare are other examples of the way government is helping women achieve work-life balance under the Action Plan. Childcare subsidies have been increased and the government is making a substantial investment in early childhood education.

The third area looks at women's health and well-being. This area includes a very wide range of initiatives in areas such as reducing violence against women and ensuring all women have access to services. The level of violence within families in New Zealand is unacceptable and eliminating violence is one of the main priorities for the Government. A Taskforce for Action on Violence within Families has been set up and has developed a detailed programme of action for the year to June 2007. It will require a very high level of co-operation between government agencies and between government and not-for-profit organisations (NGOs) working in the area. Additional funding has been announced

for NGOs and we are working to ensure areas like policing and the justice system work effectively to reduce violence.

An objective which sits across these three action areas is encouraging women into leadership roles. In addition to its policy responsibilities, the Ministry of Women's Affairs operates a Nominations Service that helps find women with governance skills and experience willing to serve on government boards.

The New Zealand government has set itself a target of 50 percent representation of women on state sector boards and committees by 2010. We are well on the way to achieving that target with over 40 percent representation on boards of governance in the state sector. We value and need more diversity on our state sector boards and our private companies would benefit from it too. The Human Rights Commission has just published the Zealand Census of Women's Participation, included in your information pack. It shows that just 7.1 percent of the members of boards of the top 100 listed companies in New Zealand are women. We are currently looking at what might be done to help the private sector increase the number of women in leadership. Any government involvement would be in full co-operation with the private sector – we are definitely not looking at quotas or other government direction.

In addition to a wide range of government departments involved in delivering the Action Plan for New Zealand Women, the Ministry works closely with women's organisations and non-government organisations to better understand the needs of different groups of New Zealand women.

Because we have good legal protections and well established policies, it means the issues we are now dealing with are mostly ones that will not be solved by further legislation. Implementation and monitoring of laws and regulations regarding gender equality is not enough on its own – what is needed is a change in societal attitudes.

In each of the information packs provided you will also find a copy of the Action Plan for New Zealand Women and the recently published CEDAW report on the status of women in New Zealand. New Zealand is one of the few countries to have submitted six CEDAW

reports and this four-yearly report card gives a snapshot of our efforts to protect and promote women's rights.

I feel privileged to be invited to join you in facing the challenges for the East Asia region on gender equality, and also enthused as we come together to address issues and seek a way forward for women in the region. New Zealand is not only supportive of this initiative but would like to bring to the table its own experiences in formulating and implementing government policy. It is important to remember how significant international agreements are in protecting women's rights around the world and how important it is that we work together to achieve and maintain those rights.

This is an ongoing struggle that will require action at the personal, NGO and government levels. In some cases, in the short-to-medium-term, success may simply mean that rights already won through international agreements such as the Beijing Platform for Action are not rolled back.

Full implementation of women's rights is a must. Goals of economic development and improved quality of life will only be achieved when men and women are working, as equals, in harmony. It is through the wheels of policy, proactive initiatives, co-operation and changing societal attitudes that change will come.

As was stated by our national representative, earlier this year, at the 50th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women in New York, New Zealand is committed to continuing to work with our Pacific Island partners to:

- address domestic and family violence
- increase women's participation in leadership and decision-making, and
- to respond to the HIV/AIDs pandemic.

On a more global stage, we all face the challenge of empowering women to be decision makers in their own lives. We join with other states in affirming the fundamental importance of ensuring policy cohesion across the range of international fora that address the issues central to the well-being of women. It is vital that the work we do together is consistent and mutually reinforcing.

I look forward to sharing ideas and experiences over the next two days, and working together to discuss issues and develop ways forward in addressing these. I want to be able to say in the future that I was there in Tokyo when the nations in the region took on the challenge of ensuring a sustained and successful programme of action towards gender equality in the East Asia and Pacific region.

Thank you.

ENDS

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