

**Keynote Address by
Hon'ble Finance Minister, Dr. Ram Sharan Mahat,
on the Occasion of the
International Women's Day Theme:
Investing in Women and Girls
(Kathmandu, March 5, 2008)**

Ms Chairperson
Distinguished Participants
Ladies and Gentlemen

I express my sincere gratitude to the organizers for inviting me to express some of my observations at this august gathering. I am delighted to be here today as I also found it as an opportunity to hear and watch such important issues and initiatives connected with women. At the outset, may I remind you of a reference highlighting the importance of motherhood. It is paraphrased like this: "if a man is educated it would only be for himself while if a woman is educated, the whole family would be educated."

I believe that social sector development based on gender mainstreaming and inclusion would energize the potential and prospect of overall human development as the catalyst for broad-based economic development of the country. Failure to utilize the untapped potential of half of the humanity would substantially weaken the development process itself and make the economy perpetually weak and unproductive. One prominent reason attributed to the underdeveloped stage of the economy of Nepal is perhaps our inability to mobilize the increased participation of women in socio-economic affairs and other responsibilities outside the home. Therefore, to make the economy dynamic and prosperous, and the development process equitable as well as sustainable, the women should become active and instrumental in all the walks of productive human endeavors.

Gender inequality as reflected in the smaller participation in the socio-economic development process as well as the lower status in development indicators has remained the general feature of the Nepali society. Initiatives towards the improvement of the status of women in Nepal started with the restoration of the democratic system in 1990. A number of efforts in increasing the participation of women in the areas like representation in the local bodies, educational incentives, targeted health services, income generating activities including the micro-finance and social mobilization, amendment to the Civil Code for entrusting the property rights to the women, etc., were undertaken. Though the deep socio-cultural factors and the age-old traditions with respect to women could not make our efforts as comprehensive and deliverable as we anticipated, the progress are nonetheless impressive.

Nepal's life expectancy at birth for both male and female has been increasing and reaching closer to the South Asian level. According to the World Development Report 2008, the life expectancy at birth for male is 62 years while it is 63 years for female. The comparative South Asian figure for male is 63 years and for female 64 years.

Maternal mortality ratio (MMR) in 100,000 live births decreased substantially from 850 in 1990 to 281 in 2006. The ratio of girls to boys at primary level increased from 0.56 in 1990 to 0.98 in 2006. This ratio at secondary level rose from 0.43 in 1990 to 0.87 in 2006. The ratio of literate women to men aged 15-24 years increased from 0.48 in 1990 to 0.83 in 2006. Births attended by skilled health staff increased from 8 percent in 1996 to 29.7 percent in 2006. Total fertility rate declined from 4.6 in 1996 to 3.1 in 2006. These achievements have been possible with the increasing emphasis on social sector development focusing on women and girls. Assistance has been provided for skilled development for social and economic empowerment of women. Active engagement of the NGOs and the civil society in protection of women's rights has increased the awareness level among women considerably.

The Interim Constitution has incorporated significant provisions ensuring the rights and participation of women. The constitutional provision of 33 percent representation of women in all State mechanisms should be instrumental in enhancing the participation of the women in the national-level decision-making. The Three-Year Interim Plan has proposed constructing an inclusive and equitable society from the gender perspective through ensuring equal rights to women in all aspects of national life, empowering them economically, socially and politically.

The allocation on Education for All (EFA) during this year has been Rs 13 billion, which is expected to substantially improve the access of girls to education. To meet the shortfall of the teachers in the schools, a teacher grant scheme under which school management committees will hire teachers primarily from among the women, dalits and the disabled holding teacher's license has been started.

The Plan also contemplates strengthening the legal, administrative, economic, social, and related criteria for the empowerment of women and their mainstreaming. A number of indicators for monitoring the progress in this area have been outlined. These are expressed in gender-related development index (GDI), gender empowerment measures (GEM), and participation in policy formulation. The average female literacy rate, their overall mortality rate including the maternal mortality rate and fertility rate are the other indicators. The major programs of the Plan in this connection are related to the policy, legal and institutional reforms. Gender equality and women empowerment as well as the social rehabilitation of the conflict-affected women constitute the other major programs. For this, commitment and partnership of all the sectoral agencies become crucial.

The current fiscal year's budget has introduced the concept of gender-responsive budget. Accordingly, Rs 19.1 billion (11.3 percent of the total budget expenditure) has been classified as directly supportive to the gender responsiveness and Rs 56 billion (33.2 percent), has been classified as indirectly supportive. The rest Rs 93.9 billion (55.5 percent) has been classified as neutral. While classifying the gender responsiveness, directly responsive would mean more than 50 percent of budget directly beneficial for women. The indirectly responsive would mean 20 to 50 percent of budget directly beneficial for women while the neutral would mean less than 20 percent of budget beneficial for women.

The Ministry of Finance will leave no stone unturned for the arrangement of necessary finance in implementing the Plan provisions directed at empowering

women and improving gender equality. The Plan has tried to ensure active commitment of all political parties and policy-makers to promote women's rights as a national priority. New legislation will be brought out to correct the discriminatory provisions in our legal system and to put an end to all kinds of violence against women. Appropriate legal provisions have already been made reserving seats for women in the public sector posts. Required attention will be directed for the strict implementation of these provisions. Performance of ministries, local bodies and NGOs in relation to gender equality and women empowerment will be evaluated and accordingly recognized. Institutional reform of the Ministry of Women, Children, and Social Welfare will be carried out as a priority function. Gender development index and gender empowerment measures will be used for the objective measurement of gender equality and women empowerment efforts. Gender-related budget of the concerned ministries will also be evaluated. In auditing the program budget, evaluation from the standpoint of gender sensitivity will be carried out.

Despite our past efforts, the problems of inequality between men and women and gender discrimination are still rampant. Women remain marginalized economically, socially, and politically. Investment for the economic and social upliftment of the marginalized and poverty-stricken women, especially in the rural areas, remains low. The armed conflict has deteriorated the condition further especially of the rural women. Human trafficking is another dreadful problem. Participation of women in increasing opportunities for their livelihood and income generating activities has remained low. Hence, they need to be empowered and their participation improved so as to address their problems, tap their potentialities, and lead them towards their individual advancement and societal progress. To attain progress in resolving these issues and challenges, we need massive national efforts backed by adequate resources, which our national capacity alone will not be able to afford. Nepal, therefore, looks forward to receiving the required level of international support for successfully discharging these momentous tasks and responsibilities.

I hope that our deliberations today will be extremely useful in guiding and supporting us to our desired destination. I thank you for your initiative in organizing this important forum for deliberating such crucial subject and its related issues that have profound impact on the social and economic transformation of Nepal.

Thank you.