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UNiTE to End Violence against Women

Opening Remarks by Sonam Yangchen Rana  
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Parliamentarians Conference on Gender Based Violence  
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ICTC (International Cooperation Training Center)

As delivered

*Your Excellency Madam Pany Yathortou, Vice President of the National  
Assembly of the Lao PDR,*

*Your Excellency Madame Sisay Leudethmounsone, President of Lao  
Women's Union, Vice President of the Lao NCAW,*

*Excellencies,*

*Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,*

It is a privilege to participate in this important conference of the  
Regional Parliamentarians on Population and Development and the

Economic and Social Committee of the National Assembly to address issues related to Gender based Violence.

It is not a coincidence that today – the 25 November – is also the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and the Secretary General Ban Ki Moon together with many UN Agencies and other partners has initiated the Unite to End Violence campaign as part of widespread and growing efforts to address this important issue.

Michele Bachelet, former head of State of Chile and now leading the newly formed UN Women issued a strong statement that “Violence Against Women is a crime against Humanity”. In Asia and Pacific, the Regional launch of the Unite Campaign will take place in Bangkok today.

I want to begin with a special word of thanks to HE Madam Pani Yathortou and HE Madam Sisay Leudethmounsone for your leadership and support in this event; to Hon Doungdy Outhachak, Chairman of Social and Economic Committee for hosting this meeting – to the leaders and members of the National Assembly, Lao Women Parliamentarians Caucus, Delegates from Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam ---- for jump starting this important campaign against Gender Violence in Laos.

Over the years, we have seen how vital leadership is in the fight against gender inequality, poverty and violence against women.

Your support will become a rallying point for women across this country and the region to make their voices heard.

In the course of the next days, we must make sure that women and young people remain at the centre of the proceedings of this conference to outline steps to prevent and respond to gender based violence.

We must also think through a compelling vision and transformation to make Laos and other Asian countries gender violence free societies.

I believe that this is not a farfetched dream. In Laos we can do it since we have a lot of positive elements – including incredibly strong women and supportive men and male leaders -- to build upon.

Laos as we all know has been recognized as one the Ten Top Movers in the world in relation to Human Development Index (HDI). Now it must and can do more to improve its Gender-related Development Index (GDI) which is a measure of gender disparity and women's vulnerabilities to violence among others.

The United Nations defines gender based violence as any act that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women or young boys, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or in private life.

Violence against women and girls is one of the most pervasive and outrageous of human rights violations. It is also, tragically, often one of the most tolerated human rights abuses.

Why ---- because it is embedded in all cultures. In some Asian countries, for example, one in four women reports having been violated by her partner at some point in their relationship. Violence by an intimate partner is one of the most common forms of violence against women resulting in a wide range of physical, mental, sexual and reproductive, maternal health and HIV problems among others.

Laos is no exception and studies show that over 80% of women especially in rural areas believe that a husband is justified in beating his wife or partners for different reasons. Recognizing this, the National Strategy for the Promotion of the Advancement of Women (NSAW) and Lao NCAW highlight the importance of removing

obstacles to women's advancement and equal rights with male counterparts in all aspects of public and personal life.

Women and girls are disadvantaged and have unequal status in many areas including education, public life and decision making due to customs and practices.

Lack of access to education and opportunity and low social status in communities are linked to violence against women. And we know that most women do not seek help or report violence when it occurs. In many societies including in Laos domestic violence is tolerated by women themselves.

To draw from a personal experience and I did not know what to make of this at that time.

During a morning walk with my husband in Kathmandu, we came across a couple where the man was beating his wife in public. I was outraged and asked my husband to intervene which he did reluctantly. The battered woman instead of thanking us slapped my husband and asked him to stay away from her husband!

What I witnessed is not an unusual scene in many societies. The cycle of violence is carried over from generation to generation, and it is

reported that children who witness domestic violence are more likely to be abusive adults.

If we want to stop men inflicting violence on women, we must help boys understand that it is unacceptable. Therefore, the Secretary General launched his Network of Men Leaders, a major component of the Unite Campaign.

Every country in this region including Laos has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women – the most important international instrument on human rights. Many have passed domestic laws to protect women from violence against women.

But the best of laws will not have any impact unless we change attitudes, among both men and women, and in our communities. This is where the real change will come from.

Gender-based violence is often the subject of passionate debate. And partners – government and international organizations including the United Nations now must be prepared to act on the knowledge and finance programmes needed.

Now the Secretary General has recently launched a Global Trust Fund managed by UN Women to support action in committed countries and provide the much needed boost for financing initiatives that address gender inequalities and violence. I hope Laos will be able to access those funds.

But money is just one factor. We have to invest this money in changing social norms, in improving and enforcing laws to protect women from violence, and in educating boys. Changing the way people think and act requires massive and concerted action – by schools, families, the media, the judiciary, the police, the religious bodies and – critically – by leaders and role models.

In short, positive change requires the Unite campaign – in which all members of society – including both women’s groups and networks of young people -- and leaders – play a key role.

The United Nations in Laos stands ready to play its role and our Agencies ranging from UNIFEM (UN Women), UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNODC, UNDP, UNESCO, WHO, ILO, UN Habitat and UNIDO are already involved in supporting national policy and programme initiatives to raise awareness and knowledge on various forms of Gender Inequality and violence to address the challenges in innovative, inclusive and sustainable ways.

We have learned that the social, economic and health costs of inaction and continued denial, silence and violence against women are enormous and have ripple effects throughout society.

The United Nations will continue to work with our national partners in building evidence, developing guidance, disseminating information and supporting national efforts and collaborating with partners to advance gender equality and prevent violence in Laos and other countries.

A strong commitment from the government institutions and political parties, declaring women's development as an important policy will no doubt be an important driver for women's social and economic empowerment.

Excellencies, Distinguished Parliamentarians,

This is where your leadership is so important. You have the capacity to wield tremendous influence. I call on you to use that capacity to eliminate gender-based violence and make the gender equality a reality for women and girls and young boys in Asia and in Laos.

By 2015 as part of the MDG compact in Laos, we hope that among other issues, Lao PDR will also be able to report on its successful participation in the Unite Campaign and a major stop to Gender based Violence. The United Nations in return pledge our continued support to your efforts to make Gender Violence history in this country and the region.

Thank you