

Closing Remarks by Hon'ble Minister

Excellency Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

Kon nichiya, and very good afternoon

It is a great honour for me to give a closing remark at the remarkable forum on the "World Assembly of Women 2016" WAW; It really is WAW! Thank you for giving me this wonderful opportunity.

If you look at the past, history world over reveals that in most traditions, women managed the interior affairs of family while men did the outside works – hunting for livelihood in the early days of civilization, or fighting during times of unrest or tribal rivalry, ploughing fields, and so on. This was only logic then. Even as countries entered into modern age, traditions have largely continued, men, primarily assuming roles outside homes in public and economic domain; while women remained within the domestic boundaries. Bhutan is no different, although changing fast as elsewhere.

As I rewind my life to a time of little girl, my mother was playing exactly this role. *[We were 7 children.... that was the normal family size, sometimes even a dozen. Obviously, my mother, like any mothers just did not have time other than tending to children and*

household chores Imagine a woman was pregnant every alternate year for almost 2 decades, if we talk of 10 children ... My mother helped me with bringing up my two children and used to say, that during her time, women had no choice now you have choices Thanks to science and technology ... that was what Ms Levine at the opening yesterday said the way we live is changing, the way we work is changing and technology allows this...]

When Bhutan started its planned development in 1961, children were literally pulled out from the families and put them to school forcefully against the parents' will. They were put to schools in the neighbouring countries *[as we had no schools other than the Monastic institutions]* Today, these first lot of children are the ones in the top executives in the government, top businesses and top positions in our new political system.

Our Monarchs have led the country with a unique development approach that attempts to balance economic growth with human welfare, environmental sustainability, and internal mental and psychological well being. We call it the concept of Gross National Happiness. It was conceived by His Majesty, the Fourth King way back in mid -1970s *[that was when he was just a young King and got caught up by a journalist after the SAARC summit ,,, and asked a question about GDP of Bhutan He said that for His country, Gross national Happiness is more important]*.

Since then Development is pursued in a manner that is not only about accumulating wealth, but to set condition to realize happiness. Inclusiveness, sustainability and good governance are key principles of GNH which are integral elements in the global sustainable goals. Education was a top development priority from the very first years of modernization. In my family, I was one of the lucky ones to attend the school. *[among my sisters none were educated, my family did not see the need ... but my younger brother was put to school]*

I was also able to continue my higher education in civil engineering which was a field dominant for men not only in Bhutan but in other countries as well. It still is to a large degree. Although government then, fully and equally supported girls, small doubt was cast **"are you sure, you will take up engineering?"** I was determined. Just like me, there are many stories of how education has opened up opportunities to ordinary Bhutanese from all walks of life.

Relatively, Bhutanese women have equal status in many fronts. By our social and cultural practices and norms, we have no explicit discrimination against women and girls *as exist in some societies.*]. In our Bhutanese society, a girl child is loved and cared for as much or in fact more than a boy child.

But because girls are more vulnerable, our Bhutanese families are very protective of their daughters. In many parts of the country,

daughters inherit ancestral property.. Even to this modern day, when girls are educated, most Bhutanese parents would still buy properties for their daughters. These are considered important social security, not to be dependent on husbands; and be able to stand on her own feet. Parents also expect their daughters to look after them in their old age that's in our culture.

As in many societies, we are also confronted with age-old and deep rooted gender stereotypes due to structural differences, gender roles and vulnerabilities associated with biological characteristics. These form barriers for advancement of women and girls. These stereotypes are not so easy to change. As we tend to think, it is not just men but women ourselves mothers, mother in-laws, elder sisters ... who hold these perceptions and mindsets, restricting our young girls to grow to their full potential. .

However, there are many positive things happening. Rapid socio-economic development, has changed dramatically the lives of girls and women. Education has enabled women to move out of the domestic walls into the world of public affairs and income earning. The WB Report 2012 on Gender and Development states that more girls and women are literate than ever before, and there are more girls in school than boys. Women now make up over 40% of the global labor force. Women also is stated to live longer than men in all regions of the world. I strongly believe education is key to bridging the gaps of gender, rich-poor

gaps, rural-urban gaps. Education is an equalizer ... so say the experts.

Just a few years ago, almost all leadership positions were being occupied by men. Compare it with the changing situation today where many of our women are in top executive positions in bureaucracy, Civil society organizations, businesses and in political affairs [*the gathering here at the World Assembly of Women, WAW ... is a testimony of the progress of women of the world, made thus far*].

But are we satisfied with having few women at the top? We are not, and that's why we are here at WAW searching for solutions, urgency ... for a society where all women shine.

People often ask me questions as to how I feel to be the first female "Minister"? I say, I even don't think about gender. I have to fulfill my duty of my cabinet mandate and as people's representative in serving the people and the nation.

I have along the journey of my life and career, as a working woman, a working mothers, I have learnt many lessons. Allow me to share few of them which I consider important:

1. Seize the opportunity that comes your way [we women are not opportunists as men are ,, at least in Bhutan]. I seized the opportunity that came to meWe should not miss them, as some

opportunities may never come again. *[Taking my own example ... After being in the government for about 20 years the big change in Bhutan was the establishment of Parliamentary democracy with first election in 2008. Our Kings forced on the people to take charge of governing our own affairs. It was a call of the nation, and senior public servants like me had to think twice. Well, I took the opportunity, resigned and joined a political party. I took a big risk in fact, because I was leaving a good secure job and going into something that was very uncertain. I lost in the first election, again participated in the 2nd election, I was successful. So here I am, being able to serve my people and my country.]*

I know today's world is competitive. But there are also wide range of opportunities opened up through wide learning sources, easy access to information, technological knowhow and entrepreneurial innovations and creativity.

2. ***We have to take the works seriously.....*** Often we women ourselves tend to push men in the front to talk, to take decision and we take a back seat. This has to change. [In a meeting, be the note taker, presenter ... volunteer in a committee or group works, We have to take a proactively active role. We have to do more than a male counterpart, because we have to prove ourselves and break the barrier of the mindset that women are only for child care and domestic responsibility]. So I worked hard. I did not compromise on what I am expected of. During my college days as an engineering students and later at work, I did what an engineer was

expected of carry out field survey, walk at the water source, inspect construction site as men counterpart did. *[Women need to strive more and work harder because we have to prove the perception held on us wrong ... that reminds me of the questions asked ... are you sure you want to take up engineering ... by a top level officer]*

3. Work life balance (life-work balance).... is crucial in the life of a working woman, a working mother. Double, triple burden is real for a working mother. The question is not about the unimportance of child care and household works ... they are so important, in fact the health of the nation lies on the health of our children. The question is how can this important role be recognized, better understood, and better handled within family circles, in the work place, at the society level and by the state in terms of policy and legal support. *[I have personally experienced the burden women go through especially when you have small growing children. I have 2 children, and although my husband was supportive, and my mother was there to help me, yet I have to make lot of sacrifices with my time, extra hours of work.]* One of the reasons why we have lesser women as we go up the professional ladder is exactly this. Women resign to take care of the children, not men ... women resign to follow men transferred ... These are fundamental issues in addressing gender inequality.*[it was very encouraging to hear His Excellency PM Abe's focus on changing the mindset of men towards child care and household chores It is time that these are not left to women alone ...]*

[Few initiatives we have taken in Bhutan is the NCWC worked closely with the government and we have been able to extend maternity leave from 3 months to 6 months; and paternity leave from 5 to 10 days for civil servants. We are also introducing crèches at the work place ... 3 done, my Ministry will start from beginning of 2017, few in the pipeline. these are few steps to support our working mothers.

4. Reproductive health care should not remain a social welfare service, but be a woman's right. Working women become quite incapacitated especially during the time of her reproductive age before, during and after pregnancy. She needs to make extra time to attend to the primary and reproductive health care Does she get that extra time? [I remember, times when important office works had to be attended, at the same time, you had hospital appointment. Many do not understand the stress a woman undergoes. These are still real in the lives of most of our working mothers.] Do the husbands or the office boss understand that she needs extra care during these times?

Reproductive health care should be the right of women. This is something that needs proper understanding and appropriate measures instituted to share the burden and take collective responsibility.

5. Last, **Support within family circles [spouse and family members] is absolutely essential** especially if you are pursuing political career. The job demands high mobility, high visibility and literally no private space. It was not easy for me when I decided to resign from civil service and join politics. Skepticism, objection was from within my family, family circles and close friends. I suppose that's why female political representation worldwide is low. *[this was also shown in our LG election. Despite massive training and awareness programmes, our local government election which was completed just about 2 months ago could not yield good number of female candidates ... one reason cited was that there was no support from their husbands and family members. Women did not vote women ... was another grievance].*

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

In the last 2 days, I have listened to the eminent speakers and discussion on a variety of important issues. Countries may differ in size and status, societies may differ, but there are many common challenges confronting our women and girls. We have talked long enough. We have had many meetings and there are many on papers. But we often see little on the ground.

However, the WAW forum has been very promising, because several actions are initiated. Mandating business corporates in Japan to include and increase women representation in Boards, and executive committees, is an impressive action. These are decision

making positions, and women are non-represented almost. *[I raised this issue in our Cabinet in Bhutan, and I was asked to suggest names ... only to realize that there were too fewer women in the top positions, and was difficult to fulfill the criteria]*. Formalizing the informal sector and bringing equality in terms of wages and pay will be real economic empowerment for women, as informal sector is women dominated. Another big change is changing the mindset and the lifestyle of men so that men take equal responsibility in child care and household chores ... This will be a step forward in relieving the burden of women. Engagement of youth will surely be transformative. The participation of girls and women in sports, means a lot. Sports, traditionally were for men and women were only entertainers [just as it is with archery, our national game in Bhutan. Of course for Olympic games, girls are participating].

Lastly, let us be reminded that pursuing women's issue is not a competition with men or waging a war with men. It is working towards a just, healthy and a peaceful society. We want our women and girls to stand on their own feet, be able to make their own choices and decisions; and above all be recognized, respected and accepted as equal partners of men in all development affairs.

Thank you, Arigato gozaimashita