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AS WRITTEN

SAARC COLLECTIVE POSITION ON WOMEN
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ON BEHALF OF SOUTH ASIAN ASSOCIATION FOR REGIONAL CO-OPERATION (SAARC)

FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN, SEPTEMBER 1995 BEIJING

Respected Chairperson,
Excellencies,
distinguished delegates,
ladies and gentlemen.

It is a proud moment for the SAARC nations to collectively voice their concerns, aspirations and future visions to this august gathering of the World Conference on Women. I would like to thank the United Nations for having given our Region this opportunity to articulate the perspectives, visions and hopes of our women in this historic World Conference. On behalf of SAARC, I also extend my gratitude to the Government of People's Republic of China and the Chinese people for the warm hospitality that we have been receiving.

For the global community, as for South Asia, the Conference symbolises tremendous hope and offers a unique opportunity for a profoundly improved quality of life, based on equality, equity and partnership between men and women. It is imperative that together we build on the unique mobilisation and unprecedented momentum that have been created as a build-up to the Conference, in order to usher in the new millenium.

Women and girl-children of the SAARC Region constitute one fifth of the world's entire female population. We are bound by striking commonalities, in spite of our distinct diversities. Our commonalities can be traced to a shared past and many socio-cultural affinities. As members of SAARC we are firmly committed to a common approach to our problems, on the basis of a continuing process of experience sharing and exchange of ideas. Our unshakeable goals are women's advancement and women's empowerment.

The SAARC Region mirrors many contrasts in the condition of women. Our region has been the first to throw up women leaders of world stature. It has also - time and again - demonstrated successful models of women's empowerment, replicable in different contexts. Yet, we cannot be blind to the grim reality that gender inequities are intricately interwoven into the fabric of our lives. Of the 1.2 billion people living in poverty, a majority live in our region. Feminisation of poverty is pronounced and gender discrimination is at its worst under conditions of institutionalised deprivation. The labour market continues to treat women and men unequally, not only with regard to employment, hut also with regard to wages. Whether it is education or health, access to factors of production, or technological developments, women are marginalised. Our socialisation processes and economic situations disadvantage women in myriad ways. The rising trend of atrocities against women and persistent discrimination against girl-children disturb the collective conscience of the region.

It is in this backdrop that SAARC reaffirms and reiterates the basic right to development - the right to develop as individuals and nations. As you know, in the World Summit for Social Development at Copenhagen we were successful in getting a global commitment for South Asia where the largest number of people in poverty live. We continue to emphasise the centrality of gender perspectives in poverty eradication and in efforts to create full employment.

We call for strong, vibrant leadership roles for women, for increased visibility and due acknowledgement of their contribution to national economies. Reform and effective implementation of laws to secure women's human rights, dignity and equal access to factors of production are imperative. Democratic decentralisation and women's participation in popular and political institutions arc critical to the process of empowerment, as are effective mainstreaming of gender concerns in macro-policies, programmes and related institutional structures. Societal reorientation, positive portrayals of women in media and strengthening of

advocacy efforts to facilitate empowerment are of utmost importance.

A SAARC Workshop on cooperation for the World Conference on Women was held in Delhi, India, in February, 1994. It adopted the Delhi Declaration underlining a common position on areas of critical concern in the region. The eighth SAARC Summit held in Delhi, in May, 1995, endorsed this position. The culmination of this process was at the SAARC Ministerial Meeting on Women held at Dhaka, Bangladesh, on 30-31, July, 1995, which formulated the Dhaka Resolution on Women, calling on the World Conference to appropriately reflect the SAARC perspectives on women.

The Delhi Declaration and the Dhaka Resolution have urged upon the International community and this World Conference to focus attention on the following urgent concerns:

- Eradication of poverty;
- The mainstreaming of gender perspective;
- The Political, Economic and Social Empowerment of Women through Affirmative Action wherever necessary;
- Access to Health, Education and Nutrition;
- Elimination of violence against Women and Girl Children;
- Survival, Protection and Development of the Girl Child;

These are concerns the redressal of which brooks no delay. It is imperative that National efforts in these directions are reinforced by a favourable International environment including access to resources, markets and technology on equitable terms.

I now have the honour and privilege to table before you the Delhi Declaration and the Dhaka Resolution on Women.

On behalf of SAARC, I take this opportunity to thank you for your kind attention. We are confident that you will respond appropriately and give the perspectives of the women of our region the priority and importance they deserve. Thank you.