



***From the desk of
Anil Singh***

Very warm greetings from the SANSAD Secretariat to all our member countries and territories and in particular to the Women of the region on this, the International Women's Day for 2006. May this day give us another opportunity to make some reflections on the importance of women in our homes, our communities, our countries and territories and our region. May it also provide the opportunity for a search for better and more effective ways for our region to move toward achieving the theme for this years IWD –“*Equal decision-making of women and men at all levels*”.

International Women's Day has been celebrated by the United Nations since 1975. In December 1977 the General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming a United Nations Day for Women's Rights and International Peace to be observed on any day of the year by Member States. The hope and vision by women the world over, but particularly in developing countries for equality, justice, peace and development over the past three decades since International Women's Day was first celebrated is still a long way from being achieved in many countries and territories. Today, more than ever, the world realizes that securing peace and social progress and the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms requires the active participation, equality and development of women.

The global theme for this year's International Women's Day -*Equal decision-making of women and men at all levels* - acknowledges the fact that women must be represented equally and at all levels of the decision-making processes of governments and administrations.

The reasons are straightforward:

- ❑ Women account for a significant part of any population and therefore have the right to be represented,
- ❑ The interests of men and women are sometimes different and at times even conflicting,
- ❑ Women are needed in representative institutions to articulate a more balanced view on areas dealing with interests of women, their families and their children, which more often are not reflected in mainstream policies, decisions and subsequent budget allocations;
- ❑ Women are capable of participating effectively in the political arena on the same level as men, but they need to be accorded an equal opportunity to do so,
- ❑ Equal representation of women and men enhances democracy, and we have seen the recognition of this in many post-conflict situations

The continuing inequalities between men and women in all walks of life, including political, traditional and other decision-making processes at the national and regional levels seriously brings into question the democratic principles that our countries and territories practice – is it a democratic process where half our population is not effectively represented?

Much of the debate on this year's theme is around the low representation of women in parliaments. The achievement by our region is currently far below the global target of 30%. Many of our countries do not have women in parliament at all.

Acknowledging the importance of equality in political representation, we have interpreted the theme more broadly and are advocating for – *Twice the power: promoting women in leadership through decision-making* – we would advocate for this at all levels of leadership, not just at national level but at sub-national or provincial/local government level, at community and traditional level, and in civil society. We also advocate for increased leadership across sectors, i.e. in the judiciary, in the public and private sector and across economic, social and cultural development areas.

Coming back to the variant of the theme – one might ask, why twice the power? Simply, promoting the equal participation of women in leadership and decision-making is often interpreted in taking power away from men. This is not the case. By actively involving women in decision-making processes we will benefit from the broader perspective of situations and issues that women can bring thereby resulting in better informed policies, decisions or approaches to address the diverse areas of need of our people.

At the household or community level, where women are not usually part of the decision-making process, we will effectively double the capacity for decision-making by enabling equal participation of women in the process. Increased women's representation in decision making is not only a human right of our Pacific women it can provide a profound positive and catalytic effect on our processes for national and community development.

Experiences in our region have taught us that addressing this issue is a complex and long-term process. They quite often include dealing with important perceived social and cultural barriers. They may also result in a call for revisiting our constitutional and electoral frameworks. They will require strong partnerships between committed societies and stakeholders.

Most important of all, the debate during this 50th session of UN Commission on the Status of Women has highlighted the need for genuine political commitment at the highest levels of governments and administrations, with a corresponding range of effective measures at the policy and operational levels with emphasis is on measurable action, setting achievable targets and a plan to achieve them over an agreed timeframe - to ensure that women are accorded equal opportunity to influence all levels and forms of decision-making and given the opportunity to help shape the future development direction of our communities, our countries / territories and our region as a matter of urgency.

Women are the 'unsung heroes of development'. More often than not their worth is not realized or acknowledged and they are taken for granted. Women are nurturers of our children. They are the first carers and educators in our families. The human race owes its existence to women, for whilst conception requires men and women, it is the women that bring us into physical existence.

I would like to close with a quote from Footsteps, a nice publication usually focusing on issues and challenges of developing countries--*"A 1 percent increase in the literacy rate of women does more to improve the health and wellbeing of families than a 3 percent increase in the number of doctors."*

This says a lot about the role and importance of women to our societies. It does not demean the important role that doctors play, but it puts into perspective the role of women. I am a medical doctor by profession, and I fully subscribe to the Footsteps quote. Not every household will have a doctor, but every household will have at least one woman, be it a mother, grandmother, daughter or granddaughter.

The challenge for all of us today, whether as advocates for change, facilitators of decisions or decision-makers, is *to think outside the box, just enough to encourage and initiate a healthy change in the thinking process that slowly snowballs into effective action, but not too radical, that it undermines the whole essence and potential realization of the outcomes that we ultimately all wish and hope to achieve.*

To a large extent whether we achieve a desired change in an area as complex as this, is influenced by how we go about engineering that change, and whether in the process we make disciples and open new doors, or inadvertently create obstacles and close all doors. Let us join forces and be the team that helps open doors.

Finally, on this occasion of the 2006 International Women's Day, I urge all people in our communities, our countries and territories, our member governments and territories, to reflect briefly on the important role our women contribute to development, and collectively leave behind a legacy that we can be proud of, a legacy that we can look back on and say – 'our generation has done much to fast track the equal recognition and participation of women at all levels of decision-making processes in all countries and territories in the region,. This is high goal, but one worth aiming for. This is our call to action. Our agenda for change.