

Nineteenth Amendment Annual Lecture
supporting Women's Right, Educational Equality and Economic Policy Leadership

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Advancing Women's Rights in the 21st Century

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Good afternoon everybody! Very first of all, let me extend my sincere thanks to the Asian Economic Forum, and Myanmar Economic Forum, and American Center for organizing the first Annual Lecture to celebrate **Inaugural Nineteenth Amendment** to inspire the many women who are playing a critical role in helping alleviate many of the social and economic injustices and build more inclusive and economically prosperous societies. I am honored to be invited as a Distinguished Guest of Honor at this meaningful Inaugural and I will be discussing forward looking solutions to advance Women's Rights, Educational Equality and Economic Policy Leadership in Myanmar and beyond in this 21st century.

I am also thankful for the many brave and courageous women leaders of former generations who sacrificed so much for having a fairer and a more equitable society.

I firmly believe that empowering more women with educational opportunities will also translate into economic policy leadership positions, and therefore I wish women around the world and the recipients of our Annual Lectures will be change agents to help advance Women's Rights, Educational Equality and Economic Policy Leadership within their own countries.

Hence, I will speak my mind to elevate the many socio-economic challenges that confront Myanmar and provide some thoughts on what a gender equality ecosystem should look like to address the many challenges of Women's Rights and Educational Equality in Myanmar and beyond.

Firstly, I would like to say that this is the critical period for Myanmar to make sure women development, women entrepreneurship, and women economic policy leadership are part of the political and economic reform process currently taking place in Myanmar. Understanding the obstacles that women are specifically facing and the pre-requisites for women to become entrepreneurs are the most crucial in today's competitive environment.

As long as Myanmar is concerned, women account for around half of the total population, and there is an increasing trend of women participation in professional, managerial and technical levels than before. Nevertheless, under-representation of women participation in every sector is still a universal problem and unfortunately, women economic policy leadership is not an exception.

Although the opportunities are opening up with the changing landscape in political, economic, demographic, technological, and cultural grounds, not every woman can be discovered, making their potentials unutilized, until and unless they are well equipped with appropriate skills and knowledge obtained from formal education, their prior experiences and social networks.

This is why; to become an effective woman economic leader is a multilevel phenomenon that comprises of the women status in the society, equal opportunity to education and information, women participation in the public life, and the individual's motivation and goals.

In continuation on the topic of women in public life, a nation's competitiveness is enhanced when the society leverages women's skills and leadership through gender equality and women empowerment mechanisms in respective areas as diverse leadership in politics, economies. Only then can the society give rise to innovative solutions for inclusive growth.

Firstly, I would like to emphasize the importance of gender diversity and balanced representation in public institutions as these institutions make laws and rules that affect people's lives and their life choices. These include allocating access to public and private resources and defining how the goods and services are distributed in society.

Secondly, a public institution that is representative of a country's population with its different standpoints, and diversity at all levels can earn greater societal trust and improve public service delivery through better understanding of the different challenges of the citizens. Unfortunately, women are not able to experience equal access to opportunities in public life even with educational advances, and added women's representation, evidenced by women concentration in the lower hierarchy. Mainstreaming gender perspectives into all stages of policy and decision-making cycles is needed to close these gaps, which brings me to my second point – women's leadership in public life.

Women's access to leadership is hindered by the lack of awareness at top leadership levels, training and development programs regarding gender diversity, and legal and regulatory framework that will encourage work-life balance, which make women bear with prolonged working hours with unpredictable schedules. I would say, Myanmar has unconscious biases against women that should be erased with training and development programs and awareness raising campaigns to reduce stereotypes, all the while supporting women's access to leadership posts. It is true to say that women are more likely than men to have fewer career development opportunities, and hence face lower pay rates and higher old-age poverty rates as women take more family care responsibilities during their workable age.

Consequently, we need a coordinated and whole-of-government response to tackle these challenges in a coherent and effective manner.

Countries need affirmative actions, such as employment equity laws, diversity targets, and leadership development programs to narrow down gender pay gap and work-life balance for a fair and more equitable society. A country's socio-economic performance can be enhanced through providing childcare facilities or subsidies for working mothers to embark on diverse career paths, as there are constantly increasing double income families in our society. The differing needs and priorities of women and men must be taken into account in each phase of the policy cycle.

Perhaps, being completely aware of the true definitions of terms and ideas concerning to this issue is a vital factor in devising its solution. Let me start with reflecting on what gender equality and gender mainstreaming are. Gender equality pertains to no obvious or hidden disparities, such as differential access to opportunities, resources, services, benefits, decision-making power and influence among individuals based on gender. Additionally, gender mainstreaming, according to the United Nations (1997), is the process of anticipating potentially differential impact of policy actions on women and men and instilling the gender perspectives into every step of the policy making cycle, so that the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs become gender-responsive.

Thus, gender mainstreaming must start with having their voices heard and their abilities to raise issues on the gender mainstreaming agenda.

Gender mainstreaming activities include acquiring gender-disaggregated data; exercising gender analysis on practical sharing of resources, opportunities, constraints and power among women, men, girls and boys in real life; and changing attitudes, goals, procedures, and cultures; and establishing gender-responsive indicators to measure how much of gender equality objectives are actually met.

As a minor example on workplace regulation that allows parents to take leave for caring for a sick child, it is more likely that the working mothers will take leave despite the regulation's equal application to both parents. With the same token, there can be gender gaps within families, at schools, workplaces, and the public sector. The key issue is that we have to admit, what is missing in the advancing gender equality agenda and recognize the challenges in mainstreaming gender into a regular policy-making cycle.

The followings are the challenges for the governments to address:

Low level of awareness on gender equality and mainstreaming, lack of gender analysis and accountability mechanisms so far, and few and feeble gender equality and mainstreaming initiatives within government institutions.

The aforementioned, collectively lead to evidence gaps on perhaps different impacts of policy choices on women and men; as a result, there is minimal legislation, regulations, policy and program and almost no funding availability to advance gender mainstreaming and equality reforms.

Another point, I would like to stress is that policy makers need to be visionary in empowering both women and men to maximize their potential and fully contribute towards more inclusive and equitable society by having shared acceptance of a gender-equal society backed up by a sound strategic plan to achieve social cohesion and national well-being.

The vision must inspire the whole society to be fairer in social, political, and economic settings for both genders, and set new expectations to call for behavioral change among citizens that can ignite a course of actions, which will make us collaborate with key stakeholders including women's organizations, business community, key decision-makers at all levels of government, and the civil society to advance the gender equality agenda.

Apart from the gender gaps mentioned above, the climate change, natural disasters, natural aging, crimes, global and national economic governance may impact differently on women and men. Therefore, policy responses to these social and economic issues must consider the potentially different impact on women and men since they tend to have different needs, roles, and responsibilities in a society.

Myanmar is fortunate to be a signatory of CEDAW; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and it is a starting point for us to design and implement gender mainstreaming with a holistic view. Despite some efforts and few positive steps in line with CEDAW, Myanmar still has a long way to go for gender mainstreaming to narrow gender gaps. Government propensity to tackle persisting gender gaps in the public sector and beyond is subject to how much the government can design and implement gender-responsive and evidence-based policies across all policy sectors, from education and employment to finance and entrepreneurship.

Only if the policy making process is open and inclusive, will it embrace diverse voices and views in policy considerations, allowing the resultant policy choices to be better, evidence-based and responsive to a wide range of citizenry while the governments improve their policy performance and restore social contract between governors and the governed.

Raising awareness and making policy makers understand the possibly differential consequences of policy choices and actions on men and women are important for inclusive policy making. Only if the policymaking process is inclusive, will concerns of both genders be integrated at all stages of the policy cycle and across all policy sectors.

This is why, in order to have inclusive policy outcomes, the gender equality policy must be adopted at the highest political levels to implant explicit and measurable gender equality standards across government institutions equipped with clear accountability, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that are supported by gender-disaggregated data.

A whole-of-government strategy encompasses legal, regulatory and institutional reforms required to remove barriers for women to equitably participate in the political, economic and social spheres, and incorporates a guarantee to counting both women and men in the process. Political will and public service leadership commitment play pivotal roles since transforming the societal norms like gender equality for all women and men, girls and boys are often inter-generational projects. Henceforward, as a national strategy, comprehensive gender equality strategies should be formulated for effective implementation

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supported by appropriate institutional frameworks with clear and coherent objectives, expected outcomes, accompanying action plans, accountability and coordination mechanisms over a five to ten year horizon across all government institutions.

The themes involved in gender equality strategies range from fighting gender-based violence, discouraging gender-based discrimination, to mounting diversity in the workplace, balancing personal and professional life, fostering women's economic empowerment, to improving women's representation in the public sector, and safeguarding compliance with gender-related legal and regulatory requirements.

A core of gender equality strategies is to deliver equal services for all women and men through gender equality programs that guide the institutional reforms to meet domestic targets, which are in line with the international standards.

As such, I would like to highlight the importance of gender institutions, which cannot be underestimated if we really want to implement gender equality and mainstreaming effectively.

According to the General Recommendation 6 of the CEDAW Committee and the Beijing Platform for Action, gender institutions that are mandated to advise on the impact of all government policies on women, carefully watch the situation of women in the society, and help formulate new policies, strategies and actions to eradicate discrimination, must be established.

These gender institutions are supposed to set out gender equality principles as a cross-cutting one in the National Development Plan, develop coordination and accountability mechanisms, and set realistic and measurable targets and indicators over a medium or long-term horizon that will describe how governments incorporate gender considerations into their decision-making processes.

The activities can be stand-alone initiatives to women's empowerment or mainstreaming gender equality across all line ministries and government agencies.

In my personal view, we need a Gender Development Ministry that will call for gender equality reforms consisting of gender-responsive policymaking, legislation, harmonization of action plans across public institutions, conduct gender policy research and policy analysis, develop proposals for legal and policy reforms, make policy recommendations and provide gender-related advice to other line ministries.

On the other hand, let me stress the important role of independent monitoring institutions like the human rights commissions or the gender equality commissions, which are responsible for providing objective solutions to gender-based grievances and oversight on how the government acts on its gender equality commitments. These independent institutions can work to raise awareness for gender discrimination, stereotyping through media campaigns, and by doing so, will exert checks on various government entities, and sustain the gender equality reform during political transitions.

Promoting the performance of gender equality institutions requires strong political commitment from the highest possible level of government, a clearly defined mandate, a sufficient budget and resources.

The previously mentioned points reassure me to firmly say that the existence of gender-responsive parliaments is the essential element of gender equality reform.

The International Parliamentary Union (IPU), which prescribes the action plan calling for gender mainstreaming in parliaments, must incorporate gender perspective into the budgetary cycle informed by gender-sensitive government's priorities for its citizens.

The parliaments should have a **parliamentary committee dedicated to gender equality**, obliged to review government policies, legislation and budgets with gender lens, while in parallel, committee members request from business membership organizations, universities, academic institutions and civil society organizations to input their views on the effectiveness of government proceedings on gender equality agenda. The parliaments should try for mainstreaming gender equality throughout all

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parliamentary committees, so that all members of parliament can address the gender implications of policies, legislative and budgetary matters.

A women's parliamentary caucus can be formed even with men for prevailing gender equality concerns in the society. Caucus should work closely with women's organizations, research firms, universities and CSOs. Members of Parliament should strive for drafting of law for gender development, such as law to combat violence against women, equality and non-discrimination law, the tax exemption law, the alimony fund law, and family law.

Parliament also must go through gender mainstreaming reforms to be a gender-responsive parliament, of which initiatives should include setting clear objectives with timelines, regular assessment of performance, gender audits, regular review at key stages of the implementation process, report to a high level steering committee, regular reporting requirements to plenary, implantation of gender equality requirements in job descriptions, and requirements of evaluation and monitoring. **Gender Impact Assessment** and **gender-disaggregated data** are the key elements in advancing gender mainstreaming and equality in legislative, executive, and judiciary sectors.

In summary, I would like to remind everyone about the main objective of my speech by reflecting on how Myanmar can navigate an effective and coherent gender mainstreaming and equality reform in the government.

First, the gender mainstreaming process must start with the strong leadership commitment, and political will, so that gender mainstreaming can be part of National Development Strategy.

Second, a "whole of government" approach and resultant promulgation of legislations is necessary for gender equality, capacity building of the government, coordination and accountability mechanisms across government agencies, which must be followed by monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Last but not least, the availability of gender-disaggregated data with gender analysis also is the key element of gender mainstreaming.

To conclude, I hope that we, Myanmar leaders will learn to appreciate the benefits of gender equality for socio-economic advancement, while simultaneously standing by and advocating for women's rights in our current societal environment, by building a more inclusive and equitable society.

Thank you all for your attention!

Reference:

OECD (2014), *Women, Government and Policy Making in OECD Countries: Fostering Diversity for Inclusive Growth*, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264210745-en>

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