

## **Sania Nishtar's keynote speech at the Women leaders' summit**

### **New age leadership: the gender of talent**

Lahore, May 23, 2015

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me begin by thanking the Nutshell forum for focusing our attention on two of the most important elements, which are critical for a needed response to overcome many of the challenges we face both globally, as well as in our own country, Pakistan

Effective leadership is critical to solving any problem ... that is a no brainer

Leveraging 50% of the population constituted by women, which by any measure has similar intellectual capabilities as men, and as evidence would argue, better leadership skills, also makes equally good sense

The question is why should we be discussing something as obvious this? Because the answer is equally evident

We all recognize that there are both systematic and systemic impediments to the participation of women in economic life and that unless we overcome these barriers we will not be able to address the existing inequalities, which constrain our ability to harness women's talents in all socio-economic spheres

We have to be committed to overcoming these barriers

But let me clarify something at the very outset

I am not making a case for the "end of men" as a famous title of an article in the Atlantic magazine once called for

Nor do I agree with what Ted Turner said at a UN gathering a few weeks back, and I quote, "Men should be barred from public office for 100 years on every part of the globe," he said. "...Let's give it to the women." Unquote

I am trying to reiterate the importance of equality and gender diversity and am emphasizing that our world and workplaces are seriously out of balance.

It is now well established that gender inequality and the lack of diversity is a significant barrier to prosperity.

It is bad for economics, it doesn't auger well for businesses and it hurts social outcomes

It is bad for economics because it deprives economies of women's talents, it reduces women's productive potential, it constrains consumption, diminishes tax yields and curtails the benefits of investment in female education by forcing women into roles where they can't make full use of their skills and capabilities.

Lack of gender diversity is also bad for business because it reduces talent pools available to firms, deprives them of the skills women bring to boardrooms, offices, shop floors, stores and farms; it denies them access to women's understanding of consumer preferences; and is a recipe for low morale, and poor retention rates.

AND gender inequality has a strong correlation with poor social outcomes. Female education is one of the strongest determinants of health status achievements. There is a higher likelihood of expenditure on health, education and nutrition in homes where women earn and are empowered and a higher likelihood that savings will accrue social benefits in the short and long term

Speaking to this audience today, I am reminded that we have come a long way in changing the narrative from what was once exclusively focused on the issue of rights and abuses and the imperative of women's empowerment to one that also recognizes issues that are higher on Maslow's hierarchy of needs

But we have to be reminded that those of us in this room are definitely a minority and that for the vast majority of women in this country there are serious impediments to personal and professional development and prosperity

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am a staunch believer of the importance of effectively functioning institutions and good governance and have a habit of circling every issue back to that point.

I am sure many of you will not be surprised if I try to do the same today.

Many of us are convinced that the problems of inequality in the given context are rooted in our patriarchal culture and feudal norms, and I do not disagree with that.

But I want to emphasize that in the worksite setting, there are barriers to the participation and growth of women in the workforce...and that institutional enablers can play a very significantly role in making women's talents mainstream.

Let me try and illustrate that with the help of three stories today

1. My first story is about a woman entrepreneur in Sialkot and her sister who lives in town far away
2. The second story is about a grassroots woman whose husband has shot her brutally, and while she attempts to live with the scars, she is also trying to make a living and faces many challenges in the process
3. And the third one is about a woman at the top of her career, a who talks not of one but many glass ceilings and glass walls, and leaking pipes all the way up

*Please don't feel exasperated, I am conscious of time and will definitely finish in 20 minutes*

**My first story** is about a woman who came up to me after a talk I gave at the Sialkot Chamber of Commerce some years ago.

She couldn't read or write and tried to introduce herself by giving me her passport pointing out that she had visas to enter most of the western countries.

She was very proud of that. She was a successful entrepreneur and owned a small leather factory- and was contracted by an Italian designer to manufacture their signature line which are sold in fashion capitals all over the world.

In many ways her success can be attributed to the amazing entrepreneurial culture that the city of Sialkot has developed, which is truly unprecedented by any standards globally. A city where the private sector has carved out an export niche for itself and has built an infrastructure to support it purely on its own without the support of the government. The people of Sialkot pooled in money and built a dry port, an export promotion bureau and even an airport.

The woman was lucky to have been facilitated by the chamber where she got all the necessary help to register a company, successfully start a business and market her product. She narrated her own story to me proudly but then her eyes hardened and she was visibly saddened when she narrated the account of her only sister who lived in another city and was unable to pull off a business.

In the town where the sister lived, there was no mentorship for starting up a business, no lawyer to assist, no one to show her where to register, no one to help her with setting accounts or to teach her how to market a product. With great difficulty, she found out where a technical and vocational training institute existed but found out only to her dismay that it was closed.

There is an insight in this story, which tells us that an enabling institutional environment is critical to foster entrepreneurship

Sialkot, is definitely an outlier, but other towns in Pakistan do not have an institutional system of facilitating entrepreneurs.

In an environment where jobs are scarce but the market is burgeoning, it is critical to equip 50% of the creative side of the population to harness their entrepreneurial skills, in ways that help both them as well as the economy

It is critical to develop gender sensitive institutional mechanisms to build capacity of women entrepreneurs, improve their access to financial and support services as well as the market and provide them with mentorship opportunities so that they can grow.

There is a huge opportunity to fill a gap.

In Pakistan, women entrepreneurs account for only 1% of its gender's population. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 27% of the female population are in that role. For some countries such as Zambia the percentage is much higher at 40%. In Latin America it is 15%.

Even in the MENA region where women are thought of as being under many restrictions 4% women engage in entrepreneurial activities.

So there is a definite gap which needs to be bridged and it is only through an institutional response that we can do that. There is a huge opportunity to revitalize government institutions which are mandated with that role in Pakistan.

**My second story** is about a woman who was supported through an access to treatment program I have established. I run a charity called Heartfile Financing, which pays for high cost operations of patients who would otherwise forgo care or become impoverished in the process and it was within that context that I met her on a hot summer afternoon in a female orthopedic ward.

I noted both her legs were in large casts.

She was vomiting relentlessly and in between bouts pointed to both her legs, telling me that her husband had shot her, shattering her bones.

She has been transported on a tractor trolley from a faraway village—by the time she came to the hospital, too much damage had already been done. One of the legs had to be amputated and the other underwent many operations.

As an organization, we did everything that any of you would in this room in our attempt to treat and rehabilitate her but that is not the point of the story here.

The lady was able to successfully set up a small out-of-home sewing business because she didn't want to be a burden on her mother and brother.

The factors which enabled her to do that were a technical and vocational training institute, a micro finance bank and a local government office.

She got the necessary skills through the TVET School in her village, a micro finance bank gave her credit and a channel within the local government system helped connect her with a retail

outlet which saved her from laboring on crutches to sell her merchandise door-to-door. As you can see, all the enablers were institutional in nature.

I deliberately referred to her case in this meeting which has more of a corporate outlook to make a specific point.

The discourse on talent and gender diversity is not only relevant to women in the corporate world and the formally employed sector. Perhaps they matter most for poor women at the grass roots level because for them it is a matter of their survival and is a way of lifting them out of poverty.

I am looking forward to hearing next from the CEO of Telenor who can better elaborate how cell-phones have become a transformational factor in this regard in recent times.

My last story is not about one individual. It is the story of all of us who work in the formally employed workspace – in the corporate world, in the non-profit sector, in the development system.

Women who know that there is not one glass ceiling but many and an entire pipeline towards the top that is leaking women at every transitional point.

Women who have to endure the double-burden syndrome – the combination of work and domestic responsibilities.

Women who have to deliver on the expectation of the anytime anywhere performance model.

Women who struggle with low pay scales, differential treatment, impediments to growth and insensitive human resource policies.

The good news for us is that there is a growing recognition of the importance of gender diversity in the workplace and how it profits and benefits all endpoints

But the bad news is that there is a long way to go before our problems can be addressed as only 28% of the organizations have currently realigned their human resource plans.

There have been many studies in western corporate settings to analyze what the right levers are to achieve gender diversity in the workplace

The impetus for these studies comes from the realization that gender diversity is often one of the most effective ways of ingraining certain behaviors in the workplace, which are needed for meeting future challenges in the workplace

Companies have been trying to understand where the obstacles to achieving gender diversity lie in different settings. The evidence has consistently shown that it is a combination of explicit leadership commitment from the top as well as systemic and institutional approaches to mainstreaming participation and growth of women that matter and that a synergy needs to be exploited.

Changes d required are not just in the corporate world but also enabling legislation is needed....legislative levers can be used to promote these practices.....many western and northern European countries have legally established biding quotas for women's representation in various structures, which really help

As a CEO I am humbled to share with you that it has been an institutional effort on my part to drive change at both these levels as a result of which more than 50% of our workforce now comprises of women and in terms of senior positions the trend is veering towards women.

Ladies and gentlemen

By referring to these three case settings I wanted to drive home the point that whilst recognition of the importance of gender diversity is increasing there is also need to concomitantly appreciate that we need institutional approaches to achieve that goal.

To all the women here today I would say that this is not a matter of *them* doing *us* a favor

This is a matter of right which your richly deserve!

I wish you a very successful meeting. Thank you for having me here.