

Convener's Note on the
SOUTH ASIA WOMEN'S NETWORK
(SWAN)



The South Asia Women's Network (SWAN) is a programme headquartered in the Academy of International Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, a Central University located in New Delhi (India). Professor Veena Sikri, who holds the Ford Foundation endowed Chair (Bangladesh Studies Programme) at the Academy of International Studies, is the Convener of SWAN.

SWAN emerged from the Conference on "Women of South Asia : Partners in Development", organized at Jamia Millia Islamia on 30-31 March 2009, with the support of ICCR and the South Asia Foundation (SAF). This Conference was inaugurated by Nobel Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus, former Managing Director, Grameen Bank, Bangladesh.

The objective of this Conference has been to bring together, in partnership, women from across nine countries of South Asia : Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Thirty three women leaders and activists from across South Asia, including three Members of Parliament (from Afghanistan and Pakistan) came to Delhi for this Conference, with more than 90 joining in at Jamia Millia Islamia from Delhi and across India.

The 2009 Conference established seven South Asia Women's Networks (SWANs) in order that women working in similar areas could network with their counterparts in other countries. Through these Networks they share experiences, learn from each other, identify best practices, and work towards issue-based collaboration across South Asia through agreed plans of action. Women work with their peers in their own sectors, and simultaneously reach out to other networks in an interactive way in order to achieve maximum results with minimum resources. The seven SWANs covered the sectors of Microcredit; Education; Arts and Literature; Women in Peacemaking; Environment; Health; and Crafts and Textiles.

In its Report, the first SWAN Conference emphasised that the women of South Asia have similar problems of grinding poverty, poor levels of achievement in the human development indices, poor maternal and child health, poor literacy rates and high levels of school drop-outs, violence against women, social injustice and gender inequalities of the worst kind, economic discrimination, including through lack of ownership or inadequate control over resources, tremendous vulnerability during and in the aftermath of environmental disasters and armed conflicts.

The Conference accepted that these issues pertaining to women are common to all communities, religious beliefs and ethnic groups across South Asia. Hence these issues can be addressed more effectively through sharing and collaboration across borders, including at the sub-regional, regional and multi-regional levels.

The Conference recognised the key role of women as agents of change, central to the process of bringing education, development, peace and prosperity within and across the nations of South Asia. Simultaneously, within families and communities in South Asia, women continue to be the anchor for preserving traditions and best practices in the arts and literature, in crafts and textiles, and in matters concerning health and the environment.

The follow-up to the Delhi Conference has been active and positive. The Coordinators of each of the sector-SWANs organised meetings and activities in follow-up of the discussions and decisions of the Delhi Conference.

The SWAN on Crafts and Textiles convened a hugely popular and successful 10 day event at Dilli Haat, from 29th December to 7th January 2010, with the participation of South Asian Craftswomen from Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. This was organised by the Dastkari Haat Samiti.

The SWAN on Arts and Literature organized the first-ever “LEELA : South Asian Women's Theatre Festival” in March 2010 as a collaboration between ICCR (Indian Council for Cultural Relations), National School of Drama, Sangeet Natak Akademi and Jamia Millia Islamia. LEELA was inaugurated in New Delhi on 8th March 2010, the 100th anniversary of International Women’s Day. Fourteen plays dealing with women’s issues, one each from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and six from India were presented in Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai and Chandigarh. The plays received critical and popular acclaim.

The SWAN on Education held a successful follow-up Workshop Meeting in Lahore, Pakistan in August 2009. At this workshop they agreed to take up gender analyses of the national curricular frameworks of India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal.

Second Annual Conference of SWAN :the Chandigarh Conference

To consolidate the positive results and follow-up activities of the first Conference, Jamia Millia Islamia collaborated with CRRID (Centre for Research on Rural and Industrial Development), Chandigarh, with the support of the Ministry of External Affairs (Public Diplomacy Division), in organising the Conference on **Cooperative Development, Peace and Security :Women guiding the Destiny of South Asia**. The Conference had two themes : Media Perspectives by Women Journalists and Women as Partners in Development. The Conference was held in Chandigarh from 13-15 March 2010.

The SWAN Conference in Chandigarh was the second in the series that began with the March 2009 Conference on “Women of South Asia : Partners in Development”. The participants included over 30 eminent representatives from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and over 60 from India.

Outcome of the Chandigarh Conference : The March 2010 Chandigarh Conference strengthened and consolidated the process initiated by the Delhi Conference. The Chandigarh Conference established the eighth SWAN on Women in Media. The SWAN on Microcredit was expanded to cover Microcredit and Livelihood Development. The SWAN on Health was expanded to cover Health, Nutrition and Food Security.

Each of the eight SWANs discussed and finalised three-year workplans and programmes of Activities. Deliberations at the Chandigarh Conference emphasised the importance of evolving goal-based Plans of Action with specific projects in order to move decisively towards gender empowerment in South Asia. The SWANs agreed to focus on developing institutional linkages so that they can function as Networks of Excellence for gender empowerment in South Asia.

The Chandigarh Conference initiated the work for drafting the proposed **South Asian Women’s Peace Charter**. The draft preamble of the Charter has been circulated to all participants. The SWANs and individual participants have been requested to send in their suggestions for the substantive paragraphs of this Charter to the Convener of the Conference and to the Coordinator of the SWAN on Women in Peacemaking. Delegates expressed the hope that the text of the Charter can be finalised at the third annual SWAN Conference.

The Chandigarh Conference discussed the presently used global indices for measuring gender parity and gender equality. The Human Development

Index (HDI) focuses almost exclusively on the provision of material amenities for bringing about human development. The Gender Parity Index (GPI), the socioeconomic index used by UNESCO measures just one parameter, the relative access to education of males and females. The Gender Related Development Index (GDI), one of the five indicators used by the UNDP in its annual Human Development Report, measures the inequalities between men and women in the areas of health and longevity, knowledge and standard of living. The Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), another one of the five indicators used by the UNDP, measures inequalities in three areas : political participation, economic participation and power over economic resources. Each of these indices has its own particularities. For example the GEM does not take into account the participation of women in local self-governance institutions like panchayati raj. Each year, the World Economic Forum in Davos estimates the Global Gender Gap Index for 135 countries across the world. This Index measures the gap between men and women (in any given country) in accessing resources in four sectors, primarily education, health and survival, job opportunities and political empowerment.

The Conference agreed to work towards evolving its own South Asian Gender Index. An important path-finder in this regard is the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) introduced in 1972 by Bhutan's former King Jigme Singye Wangchuk. The four pillars of GNH are the promotion of sustainable development, preservation and promotion of cultural values, conservation of the natural environment, and establishment of good governance. These issues are particularly relevant for gender equity and empowerment in South Asia. The significant contributions to the economy and to overall GDP growth made by home-based women workers and by the large numbers of women working in the unorganised sector throughout South Asia are rarely factored in. The Conference agreed that all such gender-related issues should be factored into the four 'pillars' of GNH in order to arrive at the South Asian Gender Index.

The Coordinators of the South Asia Women's Networks (SWANs) are :

- Professor Veena Sikri, Convener of the Conference and Coordinator of the SWAN on Arts and Literature.
- Ms Shinkai Zahine Karokhail, Coordinator of the SWAN on Women in Peacemaking. Ms Karokhail is Member of the National Assembly of Afghanistan, and Member of the National Assembly's Budget and Finance Committee.
- Dr Mira Shiva, Coordinator of the South Asian Women's Network on Health, Nutrition and Food Security. Dr Mira Shiva is Director, Initiative for Health, Equity and Society; and Founder Member, Diverse Women for Diversity.

- Dr Rasheda K Choudhury, Coordinator of the SWAN on Education. Rasheda is Executive Director, CAMPE (Campaign for Popular Education), Dhaka (Bangladesh).
- Ms Jaya Jaitly, Coordinator of the SWAN on Crafts and Textiles. Ms Jaya Jaitly is Founder and President of the Dastkari Haat Samiti, New Delhi.
- Ms Shaheen Anam, Coordinator of the SWAN on Microcredit and Livelihood Development. Shaheen is Executive Director of the Manusher Jonno Foundation, Dhaka (Bangladesh).
- Dr Vandana Shiva, Navdanya (Research Foundation for Science, Technology & Ecology), New Delhi (India), and Dr Uchita de Zoysa, Executive Director, Centre for Environment & Development (CED), Colombo (Sri Lanka), Co-Coordinator of the SWAN on the Environment
- Ms Nandini Sahai, Coordinator of the SWAN on Women in Media. Nandini is Executive Director, The International Centre, Goa and Founder Director, MICCI (Media Information and Communication Centre of India).

The follow-up to the Chandigarh Conference has been vigorous.

The SWAN on Women in Media held its first meeting on 22-24 November, 2010 at The International Centre, Goa, organized by Coordinator Nandini Sahai and SWAN Convener Veena Sikri. This was an excellent meeting with the participation of around 35 eminent media representatives from all the SWAN member countries. The group has identified its priorities for further action. The web-site for the South Asia Women's Network (SWAN) was inaugurated at this meeting. The web-site (www.swaninterface.net) is currently being built up.

The SWAN on Arts and Literature has started work on two projects. The first is publishing a special volume with the Performance Text and the Director's Note for the 14 plays that participated in the first edition of LEELA : South Asian Women's Theatre Festival held in India in March 2010. This SWAN has also started preparations for the second edition of LEELA, with plays and a seminar on the theme "Women's Voices in the Sufi, Bhakti, and other Pluralistic Traditions of South Asia".

The SWAN on Crafts and Textiles, through the Dastkari Haat Samiti, hosted 28 resource persons and craftswomen from across South Asia at Dilli Haat

from 4 to 17 January 2011. This two-week event under the rubric of “Crafting Friendships” included a two-day seminar on “Sustainable Livelihoods through Crafts for the Women of South Asia”, and a ten-day workshop on “Design Development, Intervention, Innovation and Implementation”. It was decided to form a panel of designers for SWAN, two from each country, and to hold workshops to develop products which can then be branded and sold throughout South Asia as SWAN products. It was agreed to make every effort to organize a South Asian Women’s Crafts Bazaar in Dhaka to coincide with the third annual Conference of SWAN.

The Coordinator of the SWAN on Education, Dr Rasheda Choudhury, organised a High Level Workshop on “Gender Equality in Education : Beyond Numbers”, held in Dhaka on 4th December 2010. Women Parliamentarians from Nepal and Bangladesh participated in this Workshop, as did Professor Veena Sikri, Convener, SWAN. UNICEF and UNGEI (UN Girls’ Education Initiative) supported this Workshop. Dr Rasheda Choudhury, Executive Director, CAMPE, is now coordinating the Bangladesh initiative on Women Parliamentarians for Gender Equality and Education. SWAN has been accepted into UNGEI’s regional partnership for South Asia. Professor Veena Sikri and Dr Rasheda Choudhury will work together with UNGEI and UNICEF ROSA on developing the South Asian Parliamentarians’ Forum for Equity and Girls’ Education. From India, Nirantar (A Centre for Gender and Education), is the participating institution for this project. SWAN would, in the first instance, seek to build an institutional network across South Asia linking together institutions working on gender equality in education.

In May 2010, Jamia Millia Islamia University signed a MOU with the South Asia Foundation (SAF). SAF-India has agreed to support convening the annual SWAN Conference by rotation in each of the nine member countries. This is in line with SAF’s cardinal objective of regional cooperation through education, culture and related activities.

Third Annual Conference of SWAN : the Dhaka Conference

The third Annual Conference of SWAN was convened in Dhaka on 2-3 July 2011, as a collaboration between the South Asia Foundation (India chapter), Manusher Jonno Foundation, Dhaka, and Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi. Ms Shaheen Anam, our gracious partner in Dhaka, had put in every effort, with enormous success, to ensure a strong and productive outcome for SWAN’s Third Annual Conference.

All the nine member-countries of SWAN were represented at this Conference. There were 72 eminent representatives, including Members of Parliament, Justice of the Supreme Court, theatre and civil society activists, media and NGO leaders, authors and academicians, among others.

The theme of the Third Annual Conference of SWAN was “Women of South Asia and the Green Economy”. The deliberations at the Conference took place in the run-up to the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development, scheduled to be held in Rio in June 2012. The discussions highlighted that the search for peace, ecological sustainability and equitable development in South Asia is intrinsically linked with the struggle for gender empowerment and equity. The one cannot be achieved without the other.

The chief guest at the conference was Dr. Shirin Sharmin Chowdhury, Honourable State Minister, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, Government of Bangladesh. Alongside the Conference, a Crafts Fair was organised at the premises, where participating SWAN members displayed their national handicrafts. The SWAN on Crafts and Textiles had worked very hard to organise this participatory display. The Crafts Fair was inaugurated by Dr. Shirin Sharmin Chowdhury on the morning of the 2nd of July before the commencement of the conference. The Valedictory Address was delivered by Ms Irene Khan, former Secretary General of Amnesty International.

Dr. Vandana Shiva delivered the Keynote Address on “Women of South Asia and the Green Economy”. Dr. Shiva expressed her conviction that the region of South Asia could and should play a dynamic and central role in the ongoing discussions on environmental issues. She said that while there were several serious outcomes from the Rio Earth Summit (1992), including the legally binding climate treaty and the convention of biological diversity, the ecological situation has seriously deteriorated over the past 20 years. She pointed towards the increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters, including cyclones, floods and droughts. Dr Shiva affirmed that biodiversity around the world is depleting at an alarming rate. The UN only recognised this threat in 1995, by which time 75% of the biodiversity of our region had been lost.

Dr Vandana Shiva emphasised that the world economic system is incapable of working with diversity, and perhaps has a fear of diversity, because diversity means freedom. She expressed grave apprehensions about the increasing drive by corporations to install systems that would privatise biodiversity. Corporations that used to draw profit from oil are now joining other corporations that work with agriculture and biodiversity to converge into what is described as “the 17 trillion dollar green economy”. All efforts to replace biodiversity by monocultures must be resisted, she said. This includes the fight against what is referred to as bio-piracy, and the patenting of traditional knowledge and biodiversity, where the cases of neem and basmati are recent examples.

Dr Vandana Shiva pointed out that the most important issue for the women of South Asia and the green economy is to protect nature, so that people have

their food and water, and their welfare and well-being. That is why, in the women's "green economy", technology has to be redefined through craft based technology. She stressed the importance of "life enhancing, life giving technology and livelihood-generating technology."

The Third Annual Conference of SWAN Conference created and signed the Dhaka Declaration as an assertion of the solidarity that women in the region offer to each other. The Dhaka Declaration points out that local economies in South Asia have traditionally been in harmony with nature, using resources prudently, and sharing them equitably. "Today, those who have created the ecological crisis talk of the Green Economy. For them, the Green Economy means appropriating the remaining resources of the planet for profit - from seed and biodiversity to land and water as well as our skills, such as the environmental services we provide". The women of South Asia seek a sustainable economy and sustainable development, which will replace inequity, destruction and greed with social equity, economic sufficiency and ecological balance for the well-being and happiness of all.

For the women of South Asia, the privatisation and commodification of nature, her species, her ecosystems, and her ecosystem services cannot be part of a Green Economy, for such an approach does not take into account the traditions and skills of the people of South Asia. The resources of the Earth are for the welfare of all, not for the profits of a few. Traditional economies generate creative and dignified livelihoods and provide the basis for poverty alleviation. "Green Economies" should be diverse and decentralized, and therefore the path of empowerment for all. "Women are the storehouse of knowledge and provide the cultural base to create and build economies that increase wellbeing and happiness, joy and beauty, sustainability and equity. It is from our region of South Asia that the concept of Gross National Happiness has spread worldwide. We will deepen this concept and make it the basis of the Green Economy".

Deliberations at the Dhaka Conference emphasised that sustainable development is not possible without peace in this region. A critical concern of all women in the region is about the women of Afghanistan, who are on the verge of determining their future, and that of the next generation. The peace the women of South Asia seek cannot ever be at the expense of women's rights. There can be no sustainability or "Green Economy" without peace. SWAN supports a conflict free Afghanistan with the inclusion of women in every process of decision-making. SWAN is working on the South Asia Women's Peace Charter in order to present their collective views on issues of peace in South Asia.

SWAN stands committed to peace and sustainable development in South Asia, as well as the strengthening its life-giving traditions. SWAN commits itself to deepening this concept and making it the basis of defining the Green

Economy. All members of SWAN will work towards retrieving the frayed geo-political and ecological condition of this region. The members of SWAN commit themselves to working together to show that a better world is possible for South Asia through regional cooperation. The South Asia Women's Network (SWAN) stands committed to forging ahead on sustained regional cooperation through each of the eight individual SWANs. "We commit ourselves to making our voices heard at all important regional and multilateral forums where these issues are being discussed".

The Dhaka Declaration recognised that "it is of vital importance to spread awareness about these issues through the media and through the educational process, which reaches out to youth and children. Awareness about the Green Economy and the significance of its diverse impacts is essential in order to enable all segments of society to make informed choices. Recognising the changing face of the media, SWAN encourages the use of new media, including social networking tools, to reach out and support the women of South Asia in their struggle to meet the challenges of ensuring the Green Economy for sustainable development".

SWAN coordinators and members have actively involved themselves in varied aspects of the discussions and negotiations relating to the Green Economy and to Sustainable Development, in the run-up to the Rio+20 Summit in June 2012

Fourth Annual Conference of SWAN in Kathmandu on 17-18 July 2012

The Fourth Annual Conference of SWAN is being convened in Kathmandu (Nepal) on 17-18 July 2012. This Conference is being organised in partnership between Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi, the South Asia Foundation (SAF India) and SCWEC (SAARC Chamber Women Entrepreneurs' Council), Kathmandu. We appreciate and acknowledge the gracious support and cooperation of Ms Pramila Rijal, President of SCWEC.

The theme of the Fourth Annual Conference is "Women of South Asia and Sustainable Development". The Kathmandu Conference will assess the outcome of the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development, and consider modalities and programmes for making Sustainable Development a reality for the women of South Asia.

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