



### **Concept Note**

#### **For the**

#### **Tenth Annual Conference of the South Asia Women's Network (SWAN)**

#### **Theme of the Conference \_:**

#### **Gender Empowerment for Sustainable Development : Issues and Challenges Facing the Women of South Asia**

The Tenth Annual Conference of the South Asia Women's Network (SWAN) is a milestone event, marking a decade of SWAN's endeavours. This forum brings together women leaders (parliamentarians, media representatives, domain experts, NGO leaders, creative individuals, and grass-roots workers) from nine South Asian countries : Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

SWAN's key focus is overcoming the serious challenges facing the women of South Asia, irrespective of their religious beliefs and ethnicities. These include poverty, poor maternal and child health, low educational achievements and illiteracy, violence, social injustice, economic discrimination, lack of ownership or inadequate control over resources, tremendous vulnerability during and after environmental disasters and armed conflicts. The strongly patriarchal mindset prevalent across South Asia has resulted in the socio-political and bureaucratic culture that undermines and constrains women in myriad spheres of national life. These challenges have defied solution, despite decades of effort by individual governments, including several outstanding examples of individual and collective achievements.

The South Asia Women's Network (SWAN) emphasizes that gender equality and gender empowerment are vital to overcome these challenges facing the women of South Asia. For SWAN, this is as much a rights issue as a developmental imperative. Key international indices rank South Asia among the regions in the world with extremely high (if not the highest) levels of gender inequality. Evaluations by economists (the annual Global Gender Gap Report, World Bank and IMF studies, and the McKinsey Global Institute 2015 Report on "The Power of Parity") agree on the critical importance of gender equality and gender empowerment for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through sustainable economic growth, social development and environmental sustainability.

SWAN's vision is to achieve sustainable development for South Asia through an integrated approach placing women at the center of every solution, as stake-holders,

leaders, and dynamic participants, not merely as 'objects' of the developmental process.

SWAN has been functioning actively and effectively since its inception in March 2009. Initially, SWAN was located within Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi. Subsequently, SWAN functioned as a programme of the South Asia Foundation (SAF-India), New Delhi, a registered Trust. Since June 2017, SWAN, now registered as an Article 64 Trust under the Indian Trusts Act of 1882, is functioning independently, with Professor Veena Sikri as the Founding Trustee and Convener.

The SWAN motto is "Wisdom, Unity, Dignity". SWAN draws strength from the realization that since the problems facing the women of South Asia are common across borders, shared unity of purpose in overcoming them can yield positive and quick results. The women of South Asia want to be the change they want to see. In their collective wisdom, by exchanging experiences and sharing best practices, they are revitalizing their shared identity and developing the brand South Asia.

Each of SWAN's nine Annual Conferences convened so far has been incrementally instrumental in achieving SWAN's vision, of sustainable development for South Asia through an integrated approach, incorporating the centrality of women's agency, voice, participation and leadership. At the Fifth Annual Conference in Colombo in 2013, SWAN agreed upon and adopted its very own "Roadmap for Sustainable Development for the Women of South Asia". Through subsequent Annual Conferences (Thimphu in 2014, Maldives in 2015, Yangon in 2016, and Kathmandu in November 2017) SWAN has moved into implementation of this Roadmap through collectively formulated projects. The methodology and objectives are agreed upon collectively at the Annual Conferences, but ground-work and implementation is by participating institutions in each country.

**SWAN's Tenth Annual Conference**, being convened in New Delhi from 31<sup>st</sup> August to 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2019, has as its theme "Gender Empowerment for Sustainable Development : Issues and Challenges Facing the Women of South Asia". The Conference will review SWAN activities since the Ninth Annual Conference, including on-going projects and programs. (For outcome of SWAN's Ninth Annual Conference, visit the web-site at <http://www.swaninterface.net>). It will agree on priorities and focus of activities in the coming years, within the ambit of gender empowerment for sustainable development. SWAN's Tenth Annual Conference brings together recognized sector experts to charter the path ahead.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the UN and the world community in September 2015 are scheduled for full implementation by 2030. The SDGs have gone some way towards recognizing the indispensable need to integrate women's empowerment into sustainable development. In addition to SDG 5 on Gender Equality, many of the other 16 SDGs incorporate specific references to the gender dimension, be it SDG 2 on ending hunger, achieving food security and improved nutrition, SDG 3 on promoting healthy lives and well-being, SDG 4 on inclusive access to education, SDG 6 on water and sanitation for all, and so on. Despite significant progress in some areas, South Asia faces serious challenges in achieving the SDGs in the remaining 11 years. Not enough is being done to incorporate the gender-inclusive approach both in the policy-making process and at grass-roots implementation levels. This is slowing down the pace of development and seriously affecting the sustainability of what is being achieved.

The South Asia Women's Network (SWAN)'s Tenth Annual Conference will discuss issues and challenges facing the women of South Asia in their struggle for gender

empowerment and sustainable development. SWAN stands for and strongly supports an integrated approach incorporating the centrality of women's agency, voice, participation and leadership. SWAN believes that gender equality, with justice, respect and dignity for all women, together with democratic and inclusive good governance, are essential and inalienable factors for bringing in sustainable development. Governments should pro-actively incorporate the principles of gender budgeting, together with gender-based audit to ensure that the allocated resources are being spent effectively. In addition, governments should review all laws to ensure that they are adequately gender sensitive in their formulation and implementation.

The genesis of the problems faced by the women of South Asia is certainly complex and multi-faceted, with some aspects that could be specific to individual communities, ethnicities and religions. Yet, in discussions and exchange of experiences during SWAN's nine Annual Conferences and the series of specialized Conferences convened over the last ten years, the most consistent refrain has been that the crux of the problem lies in the firmly entrenched mindset towards women, a mindset that mitigates against respect, equality and empowerment for the women of South Asia. The need for changing mindsets is the most significant common thread that SWAN encounters in the feedback from all its activities.

Essentially, the patriarchal system, as it has evolved, has brought in a mindset that ensures women's subordinate role within family and society. As a result, women are exposed to violence in its worst forms, the girl-child has seriously reduced access to educational facilities, and mothers to healthcare, including maternal healthcare. Patriarchy and violence, including threats of violence, erode the very foundations of gender justice. They undermine and negate the objectives of constitutional and legal provisions favouring gender equality, and obstruct the advancement and empowerment of women in social, political and economic spheres of activity.

SWAN's flagship project, **Women for Change : Building a Gendered Media in South Asia**, recognizes the critical role of the media in changing mindsets towards women. The media is a reflection of society, but it can also be an agent of change, through media freedom with responsibility. The media is an important partner in the promotion of gender equality as well as in removing negative gender stereotypes embedded in individual and community mindsets. This project seeks to enhance the role of media in strengthening the struggle for a gender equal society in South Asia. If sufficiently empowered, women in media across South Asia can themselves play a vital role in creating awareness about the need for gender equality in building inclusive societies. Women in media can become agents for bringing in the change they want to see. The need to deter, counter and overcome gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment is a cross-cutting priority in this project, as an issue that adversely impacts every aspect of women's work in media.

This flagship SWAN project has made significant progress since it was first conceptualized and launched at SWAN's Annual Conference in Thimphu in September 2014. Phase I was successfully completed by October 2016. The Gender Sensitive Guidelines for Women in Media in South Asia (GSGWMSA), covering print, electronic and online media, including entertainment media and advertising sectors, were developed at the Regional Consultations among the participating countries of South Asia, convened in New Delhi in May 2016. These GSGWMSA were deliberated upon and validated through National Consultations convened by participating institutions in their respective countries. Subsequently, the GSGWMSA and the outcome of the National Consultations were discussed at SWAN's Eighth Annual Conference convened in Yangon (Myanmar) in October 2016. The GSGWMSA were formally adopted.

A significant part of Phase II has also been completed. The objective of Phase II is to complete the Baseline Survey to assess the status of women in media in South Asia, thereby providing the basis for monitoring and evaluation, together with the roadmap for measuring annual progress and achievements, combined with advocacy strategies. All nine participating SWAN countries have completed the Secondary Research for the Baseline Survey. In May 2018, the Regional Coordinators for this project, Professor Gita Bamezai, Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC), New Delhi, and Professor Jaishri Jethwaney, Institute for Studies in Industrial Development (ISID), New Delhi, arranged the Regional Training and Consultation Workshop for South Asia for the primary research component of the Baseline Survey.

The Advisory Board for this project, comprising eminent media researchers and media representatives, is now compiling the Interim Report on the Status of Women in Media in South Asia. This will be discussed and finalized at the Tenth Annual Conference of the South Asia Women's Network (SWAN).

The Tenth Annual Conference will include thematic sessions on some of the major challenges facing the women of South Asia. Principal among these are (i) South Asia's Malnutrition Challenge : A Women-Led Strategy for Fast-tracking Improvement; and (ii) Women's Unpaid Work : Is this the link to declining Female Labour Force Participation Rates?

**South Asia's Malnutrition Challenge : A Women-Led Strategy for Fast-tracking Improvement** : The UNICEF Report published in July 2019 on "The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World" has emphasized the strong links between hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition, calling for a more comprehensive approach to understanding these inter-relationships. This UNICEF Report disturbingly points out that the prevalence of undernourishment has remained "virtually unchanged" over the last three years (including the prevalence rates of anaemia among women), while the incidence of hunger is slowly on the rise. And South Asia is the worst affected region in the world, where you have the largest number of severely food-insecure people, and the highest prevalence of stunting and wasting among children. All governments in South Asia attach the highest importance to overcoming these serious problems, but slow progress in meeting targets (including the relevant SDGs) is hampering economic growth, prosperity and the full realization of the demographic dividend. The South Asia Women's Network (SWAN) has, in its discussions at the Ninth Annual Conference in November 2017, emphasized the critical role that women can and should play in overcoming these problems, at the micro (family) and community levels. Women (and adolescent girls) are the principal sufferers, and this inevitably reflects itself through the poor health (including low body weight at birth) of the children they bear. As a natural corollary, women should play a central role in the solution-seeking and solution-implementation process, bringing to bear their traditional knowledge of health-sustaining and nutrition-building processes strongly based on locally-available inputs, combined with the relevant aspects of modern science. This is likely to yield the quickest possible results, and, in the process will empower the women as equal partners in fulfilling every responsibility in the home and in society. The UNICEF Report cited above concludes that "reducing gender inequalities...needs to be either the means to improving food security and nutrition, or the outcome of doing so". The Tenth Annual Conference will discuss all aspects of this vital issue, in order to agree on the best way forward. <sup>1</sup>

**Women’s Unpaid Work and Their Empowerment** : Professor Indira Hirway points out that “there is an urgent need to measure unpaid work using sound concepts and methods to produce quality time-use data, as it is an important component of the economy”<sup>2</sup>. This is needed, she emphasizes, to analyse critical concerns of the economy, including gender inequality, as well as poverty, unemployment, and human resource development. The discussion on Women’s Unpaid Work was first taken up in the 1970s at the Commission on the Status of Women. At the 1975 World Conference on Women in 1975, it was emphasized that women’s unpaid work is effectively subsidizing state investments in agriculture, health, water, food security, and fuel. The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action highlights the vital need to evaluate women’s unpaid work so that it can be included in the national accounts, and so in the GDP. Across South Asia, Time Use Surveys indicate that women’s involvement in unpaid work is far higher than that of men. For India, the figure is five hours per day of unpaid work for women as against less than one hour for men<sup>3</sup>. In India, 93% of the workforce is in informal employment, with a majority being women; and 80% of all women workers are associated with the farm economy, mostly through unpaid work with limited access to social protection. This pattern repeats itself across South Asia. A discussion on including women’s unpaid work in the national accounts is vital because of the adverse impact of non-inclusion on gender equality, on gender empowerment and on women’s status in society as a whole. In the developed countries, care for the elderly is very high-cost, either for the state or for private individuals who bear the bill. In South Asia, care for the elderly is taken for granted as part of the daughter’s or daughter-in-law’s responsibilities. As a result, especially in India as also in many countries of South Asia, women’s labour-force participation rates are declining. Figures show that between 1993 and 2011, in India “21 million women have exited the workforce, and a large majority has moved into the realm of ‘domestic responsibilities’”<sup>4</sup>. Women are working, but their work-output is not included in the GDP. They expend so much energy and time in the collection of goods to meet the basic needs of the household (water, fodder, fuel, and raw material for crafts), combined with supplementary free work in agriculture, that they have no time or energy left (after this drudgery) to consider joining the labour market. They have far less time for rest, sleep, recreation, let alone for studying or skill formation. The Tenth Annual Conference will discuss all aspects of this vexatious issue, to achieve a consensus on policy recommendations that can be made for Governments, and for further research.

The **Valedictory Session** will be the South Asia Parliamentarians’ Round Table where eminent representatives from each country will share their views and ideas on the path ahead on gender issues, with special reference to the work of the South Asia Women’s Network (SWAN).

Veena Sikri  
Founding Trustee & Convener,  
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<sup>2</sup> Indira Hirway (ed) “Mainstreaming Unpaid Work : Time-use Data in Developing Policies”, page xxiii, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2017

<sup>3</sup> Rania Antonopoulos 2009

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Reichmann Tavares, UN Women Representative, New Delhi, in Preface to “Mainstreaming Unpaid Work”