

FIRST LADY'S SPEECH
WIEF MUSLIM WOMEN ROUNDTABLE
“UNLEASHING THE POTENTIAL OF MUSLIM WOMEN

Excellency Princess Zahra, Distinguished Panelists, Dear Delegates!

Assalam-o-Allakum

It gives me great pleasure to be present today among such a distinguished group to discuss what I believe is a fundamental issue that preoccupies leaders, statespersons academia civil society and most importantly WOMEN representing all walks of life. The presence of such a group of delegates, who have come in from not only various parts of Pakistan but also from abroad demonstrates their zeal and personal passion and commitment to the Women cause. Welcome to Islamabad.

Dear Ladies!

The theme of this roundtable “Unleashing the Potential of Muslim Women” represents A hope, An desire, An opportunity, An asciration and most importantly a commitment to overcome the multifaceted challenges facing the women of 21st century, I would like to applaud the organizers for including such an important topic in this forum, as such forum facilitate understanding of issues, sharing of best practices, raising of awareness and creating global networks.

Dear Ladies!

These efforts housed in such beautiful locate may seam just another gathering to SOME but they definitely assist in spurring a spirited debate that in my view helps women over the medium to long term. This is one of the reasons why Government of Pakistan offered and consented to host the pre-forum roundtables and the 2nd session of World Islamic Economic Forum with our Malaysian friends.

Ladies!

I bring no specific expertise to the women issues to which I am sure the distinguished gathering represents a far greater wisdom of women talent. However, as representative of our State, I can and do bring in Government of Pakistan's firm commitment and resolve in addressing and unleashing the potential of women in Pakistan in Pakistan- no just Muslim women but women representing all ethnic groups and religious affiliations.

May, I also invite your attention to some of the measures taken by the present government, which by no means is an exhaustive list – As compared to the past the women are enjoying more respect, rights and empowerment, with 33 percent representation in the local government system and over 20 percent representation in the National Assembly. 10 percent jobs quota for women in civil services, which after implementation, would provide more job opportunities to educated women.

Dear Ladies!

Now coming to the specific issue of Muslim women, I would like to draw your attention to their numbers and by women, I mean the entire age bracket from infancy to adulthood. This number of Muslim women, as per this broader definition and taken at 650 million represents a significant number by any account.

Ladies!

How do we unleash the potential of this significant group of global populace? I am sure that roundtable would discuss interesting ideas and prospects for which I would like to leave maximum time for the panel and the ensuing discussion. I would restrict myself to some thoughts and suggested prescriptions – not meant to be instructive and exhaustive but facilitative and enabling which I would like to offer as an additional menu for the discussion package that follows.

Dear Ladies

Let me DEFINE a vision for A three pronged Strategy for Unleashing the Potential of Muslim Women and then FLAG some of the issues that would constitute the broad operational parameters for this mantra.

- Firstly Creating a Realization in the society that the size, role and current status of women requires a concerted effort at delivering a quantum change in the traditional approach to how women are mainstreamed as an active and contributing member of the society.
- Secondly Overcoming Barriers to women empowerment emancipation and development in political, economic and social arenas.
- And; Thirdly Providing Equal Opportunities for women and ensure a level playing field.

Firstly on Creating a Realization, while, it may seem trivial to some, creating a realization in societies to mainstream women's active and contributing role remains a necessary step in the overall empowerment and emancipation of women in Muslim societies. How does one create a realization? This is not an easy process and generally has to do with the level of development of a society. There is no one size fits all approach that can be applied here. Each country will have to devise its own strategy in accordance with the socio-cultural norms.

Ladies!

Secondly on Overcoming Barriers. One of the major challenges and problems in unleashing the potential of Muslim women remain the multiple number of BARRIERS that impede women progress and emancipation in the social, political and economic fields. We need to confront these barriers and find a way to address these given our social context and development pace.

Dear Ladies!

Let me flag some of the more pressing issues that can be categorized as barriers to women progress, empowerment, emancipation and development in the social, political and economic arenas.

- Examine sincerely and seriously what impedes women development in individual Muslim countries and societies.

- Review and question outmoded national laws and norms that may now require innovative approaches in changed environment.
- Overcoming prejudices and stereotyping of women both within and outside Muslim societies.
- Overcoming women abuse due to ignorance and distorted version of women rights.
- Overcoming the current infatuation of the western world on trivial issues like women dress code in western societies.
- Dealing with women illiteracy across the Muslim world.
- Attacking violence and discrimination against, women.

Ladies!

Thirdly on providing equal opportunities, no society or group within a society can flourish or reach its true potential without being accorded a rightful equal opportunity and a level playing field and women remain no exception. In order to facilitate equal opportunity, it has to be ensured across the board that gender disparities in education and employment opportunities are reduced and eventually eliminated. Respecting and attaining the universal Millennium Development goals (MDG) as committed by governments provide a measure to create such enabling environment

For economic opportunities, we need to encourage women entrepreneurship and facilitate credit opportunities to women, in order to mainstream women as equal partners in development, it has to be ensured that human resource and skill development of women is accorded priority.

Dear Ladies!

In the end I would like to add that the success of any such gathering does not solely depends on the number of questions it helps answer, but also depends on the new insights or questions it raises for various stakeholders to delve on. I have no doubt that

this forum would also help bring additional insights and networks to help resolve some of the more pressing issues facing women today, Here I would also acknowledge the efforts of our co-hosts the World Islamic Forum Foundation, The Asian Strategy Leadership Institute, the Islamic Centre for Development of Trade, the Islamic Chamber of Commerce and Industry along-with the Government of Pakistan in making this forum a success.

Thank you for your attention