2011 has become an important milestone for women’s rights. It marks the 100th anniversary of International Women’s Day on 8 March and the launch of UN Women to accelerate efforts to ensure women’s rights around the world. With these developments, the next few weeks is bound to see women’s issues on the international agenda.

Read the first e-newsletter of UN Women in South Asia to learn more about the new organization. Please do send in your thoughts and queries to registry.india@unwomen.org. Download the brochure or visit our new website, www.unwomensouthasia.org.

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UN Women’s Website for South Asia

The new website for UN Women in South Asia presents work, results and priorities across nine countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Pakistan, Maldives, Nepal, India and Iran. Please see www.unwomensouthasia.com
UN Women: A Global Champion for Women’s Voices

A New Beginning
Message by Anne F. Stenhammer, Regional Programme Director, UN Women

A new decade started this year, with much to celebrate and ponder. Since the first-ever International Women’s Day a hundred years ago, women have come a long way. They have earned the right to vote and work.

In South Asia, there is still much more to be done. In India, almost 2 out of every 3 women reported facing incidents of sexual harassment between 2-5 times in the past year in public spaces. There rests upon us the huge task of making our cities safe for women and making them partners in the peace process.

For too long, women have been forced to stand on the sidelines, whether the issue is political leadership, safety in conflict zones, protection from violence or access to public services. The time has come for women in South Asia to stand up as leaders and come to the center-stage as actors of change.

About UN Women

UN Women is the global champion for women and girls. Its establishment in 2010, applauded around the globe, offers a historic opportunity to jump-start progress for women and for societies. UN Member States and women’s rights advocates joined together to create UN Women. They recognized that making gender equality a reality in the lives of women and girls demanded an organization with worldwide reach, sizable expertise and significant resources.

UN Women stands behind women’s equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on five priority areas:

- Increasing women’s leadership and participation;
- Ending violence against women and girls;
- Engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes;
- Enhancing women’s economic empowerment;
- Making gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting.
New Delhi, 4 March 2011: When Laxmi Bai, a dynamic panchayat (village body) leader took to the stage at the launch of UN Women in India, she was unstoppable. Speaking about her experiences as an administrator and leader in Rajasthan, she used the slogan of stree shakti or women power and urged the audience to work for the empowerment of women in rural India.

Along with Shanti Bai a fellow sarpanch (village head), Laxmi also launched the new UN Women website for South Asia, www.unwomensouthasia.org. They were both speaking at a formal Reception to celebrate the establishment of UN Women. Music and films were the highlight of the Reception that was attended by representatives from the United Nations, government representatives, donor agencies, media and Members of Parliament.

Anne F. Stenhammer, the Regional Programme Director of UN Women South Asia, spoke of UN Women’s commitment in working for women and girls in South Asia. “We are here to make a difference in South Asia. UN Women is committed to walk together with women in their journey to claim their rights and dignity,” she said. Welcoming the creation of UN Women, Dr. D. K. Sikri, Secretary, Ministry of Women and Child Development congratulated UN Women, highlighting success from past collaborations and plans for the future. In his address, Patrice Coeur-Bizot, the United Nations Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative, spoke of how UN Women in India will help to accelerate work of the United Nations on gender equality.

Pia Sukanya, a talented young singer and songwriter, set the tone for the evening with her powerful musical performances. She performed Mann Ke Manjeere, a song to increase awareness on violence against women that was originally produced by the Breakthrough Trust. Along with guitarist Anurag Shankar, Pia also sung and recited to music an Urdu poem called “Keep our words alive” specially written for UN Women by Noreen Chaudhry from Pakistan.

More music enlivened the evening, when the Mozart choir of India, took the stage to sing compositions by Mozart. In a duet with Pia, the children, all aged between 8 and 15 with Pia Sukanya, enthused the gathering with their music.
New Delhi, 4 March 2011: An estimated 2.2 million women across the country will benefit from this year’s Union Budget with the doubling of the monthly honorarium for women worker of India’s largest nutrition scheme, the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS). On the other hand, allocations for women as a proportion of the total budget outlay have registered only a marginal increase.

These were some of the observations of panelists participating in a discussion to examine gender allocations in the Union Budget 2011-12. Organized to celebrate the launch of UN Women, the discussion featured eminent experts such as Prof. Jayati Ghosh, Professor of Economics, Jawaharlal Nehru University and Dr. Mridul Eapen, Member, State Planning Board, Kerala.

Commenting on the Union Budget, eminent economist Prof. Jayati Ghosh noted that there were no real benefits for women if inflation is taken into account. She said that women will continue to bear the burden of the rise in fuel and food prices.

Dr. Mridul Eapen gave concrete examples of how women’s needs are being addressed through different welfare schemes. “In Kerala, efforts have been made to address the needs of women in infrastructure. Allocations have been given to build public toilets in restrooms and waiting rooms at bus stops and ports.” The panel discussion was organized by UN Women, the Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA) and the United Nations Information Centre.
UN Women Announces Regional Programme for Widows in Nepal, India and Sri Lanka

An estimated 15,000 widows live on the streets of Vrindavan in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Their stories are little heard and their tales of survival are little known. On the 100th anniversary of International Women’s Day, UN Women announced the launch of a new regional programme to address the needs of widows in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

The three-year programme, funded jointly by the UN Women Swiss National Committee and the Standard Chartered Bank, will be implemented in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka to reduce the social ostracism faced by widows. This will be done by collecting data and evidence to highlight the stigma faced by them, by working with widows’ coalitions so they can speak up and access public services, and finally by guaranteeing that discriminatory social practices against widows are reviewed and repealed.

Nepal Adopts National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security

On 17 February, Nepal became the first country in South Asia to adopt a National Action Plan on women, peace and security. Globally, only 25 countries of 192 member states have adopted such plans on the United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs) 1325 and 1820. The Nepal Action Plan was developed through a collaborative process across the country involving the government, UN Women, civil society, development partners and the women and girls affected by conflict. As a post-conflict country, the Resolutions offer Nepal important guidance on the inclusion of women.