

Asian University for Women Inaugural Symposium Summary

October 15-18, 2008; Chittagong & Dhaka, Bangladesh

The Asian University for Women's Inaugural Symposium and Meetings opened on Wednesday, October 15, 2008 in Chittagong, Bangladesh. Guests attended an intimate dinner at the AUW campus site, which included a presentation on Campus Design and speeches by Judy Moody-Stuart, Member of the Board of Directors of the Asian University for Women Support Foundation (AUWSF), Jack Meyer, Chairman of the Board of Directors, Asian University for Women Support Foundation; Senior Managing Partner, Convexity Capital Management, and Dr. Kamal Hossain, principal author of Bangladesh's constitution. After dinner, AUW Access Academy students performed a series of traditional dances.

Bangladesh has often been described as a "development laboratory;" guests observed this first hand on Thursday, when they attended one of the following study tours in Chittagong: Madrasas, textile factories, Grameen Bank, and BRAC.

The third day of the events took place at the Radisson Hotel in Dhaka, where attendees gathered to hear a series of presentations from panels of internationally renowned speakers. The symposium was dedicated to Professor Alan Rosenfield, Dean Emeritus of the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, Chairman of BRAC USA, and a strong supporter of AUW's vision.

Kathy Pike, Member of the Board of Directors, Asian University for Women Support Foundation; Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatry, Columbia University; Visiting Professor, Temple University-Japan Campus, chaired the opening session. She addressed the students, telling them, "As graduates of AUW you will not only be leaders in your local communities but also agents of global change."

Lone Dybkjaer, Co-Chair of the Asian University for Women International Support Committee; Member of the Danish Parliament; Former Danish Minister of Environment; Member of the European Parliament, suggested that "we need lighthouses like AUW to point the direction of the ship..." in order to affect change in the world, make poverty history and promote inter-cultural dialogue between East and West. She further remarked that while women of her generation had made much progress, they had done so by living according to male norms and implored the students of AUW to define their own lives and norms.

Zoya Hassan, Professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University; Member of India's National Commission for Minorities, focused on the need for systematic action to address the various structural issues that prevent women from fully participating in the political process in India. She focused on "the paradox of political empowerment without structural changes" and highlighted the need for financial support, training and other incentives to encourage not only representation of women in politics but also active participation in the political process in order to affect real change. She noted that AUW is addressing exactly these issues by providing leadership skills and training that will lead to gender-positive outcomes for society.

Guests then attended one of two parallel sessions, "Breaking Old Molds: Success in Empowering Women" or "Womenomics and Ethics: The Human and Economic Cost of Discrimination against Women."

Lauren Moriarty, Former U.S. Ambassador to Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), chaired the session on "Breaking Old Molds." She framed the discussion by noting four principles needed as agents of change to empower women: skills, confidence, role models and mentors. Shahida Jaffrey, Vice Chancellor of SBK Women's University, in Quetta, Baluchistan, Pakistan, shared her experience as founder of the SBK University for Women to highlight the importance of creating positive role models for the young girls of Baluchistan, an ultra-conservative area of Pakistan. Jyoti Macwan, General Secretary of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India, shared her journey from a young tobacco processor to the head of the organization.

Lady Judy Moody-Stuart, Member of the Board of Directors, Asian University for Women Support Foundation; Educator, Community Advocate and Philanthropist, chaired the “Womenomics and Ethics” panel. Mehrangiz Kar, an Iranian Human Rights Activist; Fellow, Human Rights Program at Harvard Law School; provided a background of the political history of Iran and women’s rights activities. She stressed that women suffer discrimination in both the public and private spheres, noting that their rights are consistently violated in the name of Islam. These violations are not compatible with international human rights laws. She highlighted the need for women to become active in advertising moderate and nonviolent interpretations of Islam.

Dr. Hameeda Hossain, Human Rights Activist from Bangladesh and Founder of Ain o Salish Kendra, noted the multiple forms of discrimination that women face today: class, religion, identity-which are embedded in family ideology and social norms. She stated that one cannot separate human rights and economics, and that economics can be affected by constraints in women’s lives.

Kathy Matsui, Member of the Board of Directors, Asian University for Women Support Foundation; Managing Director, Chief Japan Strategist, and Co-Director of Pan Asian Investment Research, Goldman Sachs (Japan) Ltd., discussed the impact of inequality from an economic perspective. Kathy noted that women’s wages increase with schooling, in many cases faster than men. The rate of return for each additional year of schooling is roughly ten percent. She went on to state that reducing the gap in gender inequality in education and employment could raise GDP growth by 0.2 percent for one year in developing nations. Reducing the gender gap in employment could push per capita income 20 percent higher by the year 2030. She concluded that investing in female education is the highest returning social investment we can make today. Addressing the students, she said: “Consider yourselves pioneers, you are true beacons of light. You represent significant and important agents of change, not just for your communities, but for the world at large. You are nothing short of miraculous. You can make the impossible possible and make dreams come true.”

In the concluding session: “Inspiring Change: Reflections on Women’s Leadership,” Vivian Lowery Derryck, Member of the Board of Directors, Asian University for Women Support Foundation; Senior Vice President and Director of Public-Private Partnerships at the Academy for Educational Development; Former USAID Assistant Administrator for Africa, remarked that we have reached a “tipping point” for women’s participation in government as female presidents were elected in Libya, Germany and Chile all within the same month. Calling on the theme of leadership from the day’s sessions, she defined the qualities of a leader as one who possesses: integrity and honesty, technical expertise, vision, a “try, fail, learn” mentality, an understanding of the importance of innovation, and the heart to help others feel that they have value and worth.

Dr. Hoon Eng Khoo, Acting Vice Chancellor and Provost, Asian University for Women, shared her personal journey from a rural village in Penang, Malaysia to AUW. She focused on the importance of values she learned at home and at school, and the role that action groups and institutions play in giving a voice and providing a forum for debate for women in order to achieve meaningful change. Quoting John Richardson, she said: “There are those who make it happen, those who let it happen, and those who wonder what happened.” Dr. Regina Papa, Executive Director of the Access Academy, also shared her personal journey to AUW and spoke of the importance of grassroots leadership in achieving change from the bottom-up.

Duth Kimsru, an Access Academy student from Cambodia recounted her journey from a poor, rural Cambodian village to AUW. Addressing the crowd in English, she was an inspiring example of AUW’s mission in action. She recalled the day she was shown a brochure for the Access Academy, and noted that at first she could not understand the pamphlet, but understood the mission from the pictures. She talked of using a dictionary to check every word until she was sure that she understood the brochure’s meaning. Only seven months after joining the Academy’s inaugural class, she was able to address the symposium confidently. Five other Access Academy students addressed the crowd, providing further inspiration for carrying out the AUW mission. These students were: Saiqa Rani, Pakistan; Sadeka Tasmin, Bangladesh; Aida Johnny, India; Ganga Silva, Sri Lanka; and, Rosy Karna, Nepal; Access

Academy teacher Katherine Houseman described the school as ‘an intellectual and emotional growth spurt’ inspired by the premise that ‘a small group of people can change the world.’

Sarah Fields, an AUW research fellow focusing on gender issues, returns to higher education and Asian history, as well as a senior at New York’s Ethical Culture Fieldston School, gave a presentation entitled “216 Missing Women” where she debuted her film “Sovereignty of Mind.” The documentary was created from footage collected from more than 60 hours of interviews of students, administrators and thought leaders conducted by Sarah during the summer and fall of 2008 in Bangladesh and the United States. Sarah’s interviews sought to examine the forces motivating these pioneering women from across Asia to forgo, in the near-term, income, traditional family prospects, and societal expectations to become the founding class of the Asian University for Women. Living and working alongside the students of AUW, Sarah was moved by both their courage in choosing this divergent path and their commitment to using this opportunity to lead their communities forward and to facilitate regional change.

Friday’s symposium concluded with a dinner reception, featuring traditional dance performances. Mrs. Rokia Rahman, Chairman of the Asian University for Women Support Foundation’s Bangladesh Board of Advisors; President of the Bangladesh Women Entrepreneurs Association, opened the evening by pledging her continued support of and interest in AUW.

Julia Hartung, Director of Development for Undergraduate Education at Stanford University read a letter on behalf of John Etchemendy, Provost at Stanford University, in which he discusses a new relationship between AUW and Stanford.

“The mission of the Asian University for Women is extraordinary. By providing access to quality higher education for women whose promise might otherwise go unrealized, the University is transforming the lives of these women and their families. By empowering women to become leaders in society, AUW is creating an important force for positive change in the world. Stanford University is dedicated to building a strong new program in South Asian Studies, and is looking forward to contributing to the living and learning community that the Asian University for Women is developing in Chittagong.”

“The relationship between Stanford University and the Asian University for Women highlights Stanford’s dedication to building a strong program in South Asia through research on contemporary economics and politics, as well as research on the region’s diverse cultures and history. Stanford students will be prepared for careers working side-by-side with their peers from around the world—including those from the Asian University for Women.”

Lone Dirckinch-Holmfeld, Professor, PhD. at Aalborg University, announced a formal partnership with AUW. The University has entered into an agreement with the Asian University for Women to collaborate on establishing a graduate program in Information & Communication Technology. As part of the initiative, Aalborg University will provide AUW with its own faculty members until a full Computer Science faculty has been recruited. Aalborg University is developing a further initiative to recruit South and South East Asian students to complete their doctoral degrees at Aalborg, before returning to Bangladesh to teach at the Asian University for Women.

“Information technology is the key to enabling global communications and the sharing of information and knowledge—important tools in the development of an international university. Women from underserved communities are often uneducated in the advances of global information technology, and are unaware of how they can use these tools to better serve both personal and community development. Aalborg’s relationship with the Asian University for Women will provide these promising young women with the knowledge and resources they need to educate themselves, their families, and their communities.”

The University’s inaugural ceremony took place on Saturday at the Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Center in Dhaka. The ceremony was well attended, with the Honorable Fakhruddin Ahmed, Chief Adviser of the Caretaker Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh presiding over the ceremony, and Dr. Muhammad Yunus, Founder of the Grameen Bank, winner of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize as chief guest. Jack Meyer, Chairman of the Board of Directors, Asian university for Women

Support Foundation; Senior Managing Partner, Convexity Capital Management, and Lone Dybkjaer, Co-Chair of the Asian University for Women International Support Committee; Member of the Danish Parliament; Former Danish Minister of Environment and Member of the European Parliament, shared their thoughts on the vision of AUW, as did Dr. Hoon Eng Khoo, Acting Vice Chancellor and Provost, Asian University for Women.

“With the multitude of problems facing women, it would be easy to just throw up one’s hands in despair. However, there are solutions. We know that the solution lies in education and cultural and political movements that will transform society so that the inequalities that have been and are still faced by women in Asia can be overcome,” Dr. Khoo said.

“This is where AUW comes in. AUW’s curriculum will focus on the progressive liberal arts and graduate professional training. The emphasis will be on empowering our graduates with leadership and entrepreneurship skills to achieve sustainable development, economic progress and social and political equity.”

“In the uncertain and complex world that our students will be graduating into, they will need skills in information-management, in ethical decision-making, and in solving complex, multi-disciplinary problems.”

Mr. Meyer furthered Dr. Khoo’s message with additional comment on AUW’s vision. “The focus of AUW will be on critical reasoning, problem solving, communication, and leadership. We want graduates who can make a difference – who can imbed themselves across the region, in both the private and public sectors, and change things. The rote learning and memorization that is so typical of women’s education in Asia will not do. We want movers and shakers.”

“We are not going to try to give an average education to masses of Asian women. We are going to give an outstanding education to a few, with the expectation that they will serve as role models and beacons for those who follow. Even a small band of exceptional leaders can change the course of history.”

Addressing AUW’s need for support, Mr. Meyer shared his personal reasons for his involvement with AUW. “Many of us, most of us, work hard and try to lead good lives, but we almost never get the opportunity to do something truly significant, something great, in the best sense of that word. If we can build this University as we hope to build it, it will affect not just the lives of the students, but the lives of their families, their communities, their countries, the region, and frankly the world itself.”

The Honorable Fakhruddin Ahmed, Chief Adviser of the Caretaker Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh effectively summarized the messages that guests had been hearing throughout the four days of visits, meetings and seminars in Chittagong and Dhaka, Bangladesh. As he addressed the large group of foreign diplomats, media, internationally renowned experts, students, staff, and special guests, he said:

“I have been associated with the Asian University for Women for several years now, observing its planning and development over time. It gives me immense pleasure to see that these years of labor have transformed a powerful idea into a vibrant reality. As I think of the emergence of the Asian University for Women, I am particularly impressed by three features of this initiative.”

“First, the University’s focus on excellence is of paramount importance. As the most densely populated part of the world, we of course worry about access to education of the widest possible parts of our population. By actively engaging in recruiting the most gifted students from across Asia and the faculty from all over the world, the Asian University for Women can make an important contribution in fostering excellence in higher education.”

“Secondly, the University’s commitment to be open to students from different socio-economic, religious, ethnic and national backgrounds is also quite significant. In this context I want to particularly applaud the University’s decision to reserve one-half of its new enrollments for students who are the first in their families ever to enter university. To the extent higher education runs the risk of becoming a purview of

the economically well off and the socially privileged, the Asian University for Women can help create a new pathway for families to break the vicious cycle of social exclusion.”

“Finally, I am impressed by the large scale global mobilization of support triggered by the Asian University for Women on its behalf. It is a rare occasion indeed when a project conceived in Bangladesh attracts the support, engagement and imagination of a former First Lady of Denmark, a legendary former head of investments at Harvard University, a Singaporean scientist, a world renowned architect, and so on. I think you will agree with me that what brings all of us together in fact is the power of this idea – that a university dedicated to the education and empowerment of women in a part of the world where too often women have been relegated to the periphery carries within it a transformative power – not only in changing the landscape of higher education but in unleashing the potential of half of our people.”

“It is indeed high time that we recognize this simple truth – no sustainable development can occur without the other half of our people fully engaging in the work of the nation. I am indeed proud that Bangladesh has been able to make exemplary strides in empowering women – in education, in economic fields such as microfinance, and in protection of rights. Now, we are deeply enthralled at the opportunity to host the Asian University for Women. I hope that this institution will grow to be a true beacon, inspiring generations of women to aspire and pursue the best education they can.”

At the conclusion of the ceremony, Dr. Muhammad Yunus presented the “2008 Leadership Award for Outstanding Contribution to Women's Advancement” on behalf of the Asian University for Women to Kathy Matsui and Goldman Sachs. In her acceptance speech, Ms. Matsui described her impressions of the week's events as “magical.”