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**OPENING REMARKS BY
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE
ROBERT O. BLAKE
SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN’S ENTREPRENEURSHIP SYMPOSIUM
DHAKA, BANGLADESH**

DECEMBER 9, 2012

Good morning. I am delighted to be here at the South Asia Women’s Entrepreneurship Symposium. Like the event in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in July 2011, this is a great opportunity to bring together over 100 women entrepreneurs, this time from Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal, Burma, and of course, Bangladesh. I want to thank Ambassador Verveer and her team for their leadership and initiative in organizing this summit and the Government of Bangladesh for its enthusiastic support. Foreign Minister Moni, thank you for personally committing to promoting women’s entrepreneurship and being here with us today. Finally, Ambassador Mozena and the team at Embassy Dhaka have our thanks for all the hard work you have put into this symposium.

We truly believe that women are the “change agents” who will help South Asia reach its true potential. That’s why we have set some very ambitious goals for this summit – to further equip you with tools for business success, to foster cross-regional collaboration and build multilateral connections, and to create a network of women business owners. Looking out over all the successful, motivated, savvy women I see before me, I am confident that we will achieve what we set out to accomplish.

Secretary Clinton, of course, has long been an outstanding and outspoken proponent of women’s rights and their economic and political participation. As she has often said, “No society can achieve its full potential when half the population is denied the opportunity to achieve theirs.” In 2009, when she elevated the office of Global Women’s Issues at the State

Department under Ambassador Melanne Verweir, she was indeed putting her commitment and leadership into backing those ideas. We are fortunate to have two strong leaders working hard to find new ways to empower millions of women and girls.

Women today face a range of challenges – illiteracy, poor access to education and credit, gender-based violence, and ingrained discrimination, limiting both their economic and political opportunities. India and Bangladesh in particular have shown that advancement of women’s rights and improvements in governance, education, health, and security come with the economic empowerment of women. On the other hand, we have also seen examples of the profoundly negative social and economic consequences that arise when women are excluded from the public sphere, and how complicated and arduous the road back to economic stability is in countries like Afghanistan.

To get there from here, however, women need to have equal access to education and health care, as well as the freedom to start businesses. Women invest 80 percent of their incomes in their families and communities and that women-led local governments are both less-corrupt and provide more public services. When we invest in women’s education and give them the opportunity to access credit or start a small business, the economic, political and social benefits ripple out far beyond the home.

What common sense has told us and what experience has taught us is that once women are given a chance to take charge of their economic and financial security, they not only take charge of their own destiny, but they change the trajectory for their families and their communities. If we can tap into the knowledge women have of their families needs and help them forge an economic identity, families benefit, communities benefit, entire countries benefit.

Education must be synchronized with opportunities to put that knowledge to good use. Events like this symposium put concrete steps in place for realizing that dream. Throughout this event and beyond, we will continue to hear inspirational stories about women who have battled the odds in establishing new businesses, broken barriers in various fields of employment, and fought for advancement in the face of cultural and social obstacles. Many of you here are the first in your family, the first in your community to break new ground – and you are the role models for the next generation of women and girls. Your accomplishments will help them reach heights no one could have dreamed of even a few years ago.

Each of you here today has a role to play in empowering women in this region. You can spread the word in your community. Mentor young women and build a new generation of standard-bearers. Build networks within your extended families, towns, cities all the way up to the national level. Find partners in government, the private sector and amongst NGOs who can advance the agenda and open doors for you. Don't let national boundaries stop you – form close bonds with those you have met here and carry on the exchange of ideas once you have left Dhaka. Thank you very much.

Introduction of Ambassador Verveer

I am very pleased now to introduce Ambassador Melanne Verveer. In her role as Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, she champions the political, economic, and social advancement of women around the world. President Obama and Secretary Clinton could not have chosen a more dynamic leader and tireless advocate than Ambassador Verveer. She has made it her life's work to support women's rights and political and economic empowerment. Ambassador Verveer is the co-founder and chairwoman of the Vital Voices Global Partnership, an international non-governmental organization that supports women's global leadership. She and her staff have been a driving force in organizing this conference and extraordinary partners for my bureau.

Please join me in extending a very warm welcome to Ambassador Melanne Verveer.

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