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Security Nexus Conversation

EMPOWERING WOMEN AS LEADERS: ROLE OF GOVERNMENTS AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

By Ms. Shanchita Haque and Dr. Saira Yamin*

An Interview with Ms. Shanchita

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The full video podcast interview is available [at this link](#).

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Ms. Shanchita Haque speaking on behalf of LDCs (Least Developed Countries) at a United Nations ECOSOC (Economic and Social Development Council) meeting on the UN Development System Reform at the UNHQs (United Nations Head Quarters), New York, February 20

SY: Please tell us about your background, your career development as a leader, as a prominent leader in Bangladesh civil services, and subsequently as an international diplomat.

SH: In 2003, I joined Foreign Service through a very competitive exam, which is called the Bangladesh civil services exam, and was appointed in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. My major in the university was not International Relations; I had a degree in English literature. It was later through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that I acquired a Master's course in International Relations at the Australian National University in Australia. However, I chose this career to meet people, to observe and understand the differences around the world, to identify commonalities, and to be able to negotiate solutions. It is what diplomacy is all about. In offering a few words about my career progression in the Foreign Service, I have served in India, considered one of the most important missions for Bangladeshi diplomats. I had the opportunity to serve in Delhi, where I earned a good grasp of Bangladesh's relationship with India, a regional leader, and a promising global leader as well. It also enabled me to understand the importance of strengthening our relationship with neighboring countries in addition to India - China, Pakistan, and other South Asian countries as well as the regional geopolitics. Upon my return to Dhaka, I had the opportunity to serve in the multilateral desks on development issues. Subsequently, I was assigned to our UN mission in New York, opening the window of opportunity for me to have an even better understanding of multilateralism with

193 countries and their delegations coming together. They discuss peace, conflict, development, human rights, enriching my outlook as a diplomat, and in the process, I have also developed leadership attributes. I am still learning and will continue to do so.

SY: Based on your experience in Delhi and subsequently at the UN Headquarters, what leadership traits have you practiced that helped you develop your skills, and your finesse as a diplomat, especially considering that international diplomat circles tend to be a predominantly male.

SH: In leading others, first, you have to respect others. As a diplomat representing a developing country, which is now on the path of graduating from the LDC (Least Developed Countries) category, I have had many challenges as a woman. However, I come from a family with liberal values, my parents were very liberal, and unlike many Bangladeshi women, I had the privilege of having equal access to opportunities early in life. I have come across gender stereotyping but I tried hard to transcend gender expectations. I have a supportive family and a supportive work environment in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and paving the way for others is a leadership quality that has emerged in the process. Although my path has not been smooth, as a woman with many privileges, I want to enable underprivileged women. As a diplomat, I do not have access to grassroots communities in Bangladesh, but I can advocate for the cause. At the UN, when we talk about Women, Peace and Security, and development issues, one has the opportunity to highlight the challenges that the women face in our societies and the institutions of any developing country. Gender stereotyping, of course, is a universal challenge. I advocate for the financial inclusion of women, their access to economic resources, and opening up a diversity of professional opportunities for them. These are gender-specific issues, and here in the UN, we have the chance to discuss these matters, understand different perspectives while strengthening cooperation. The whole point of being at the negotiating table is seeking opportunities for cooperation. I could have worked in my own country, but I have been appointed with a specific purpose to negotiate options for developing countries in the UN system. There are three pillars of the United Nations: Human Rights pillar, Peace and Conflict pillar, and the Development pillar. Women's issues are vital to all of these, and I believe I can work on their behalf. If I succeed in bringing a UN project to Bangladesh through my work with various agencies here, it will be an effort on my part to serve underprivileged women of Bangladesh. An ICT (Information and Communications Technology) project in Bangladesh through a UN agency would make my work as a diplomat more meaningful as it would enable the underprivileged in Bangladesh, particularly women and children.



"Investing in women plays a catalytic role," Ms. Shanchita Haque representing Bangladesh Permanent Mission to UN, on Financing for Gender Equality, Feminist Task Force @femtaskforce Twitter Feed. April 25, 2018



Ms. Haque in a session of the Ad Hoc Open-Ended Working Group established by the United Nations General Assembly resolution 72/277 ("Towards a Global Pact for the Environment"). UNHQs, Nairobi, May 2019.

SY: How do women contribute to security-related outcomes in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bangladesh and at the United Nations. Do they lead differently than men?

SH: Yes, women lead differently: there is a feminine approach and a masculine approach. The use of force may be considered a masculine approach. However, a greater reliance on negotiation, more engagement, more emphasis on understanding the needs and the priorities of stakeholders - this is something I consider a feminine approach. For example, I believe the whole UN peacekeeping operations system is based on a feminine approach because it is about engaging different stakeholders. It's about preventing the use of force, about creating accountability and justice for gender-based crimes or gender-based discrimination in a conflict area. It is a soft approach. So, if you bring more women to the peace negotiations table, then you are bringing in personalities who, by virtue of being women, are naturally inclined to communicate to problem-solve. I have heard here in UN from many peacekeeping experts that if there is even one woman in the peacekeeping mission, she brings a lot of change in the environment. She understands the issues of the women and children very well, and she tries her best to consider all possible solutions for them. Men's contribution to peacekeeping missions is essential and they are equally crucial for successful operations. They support many aspects of the feminine approach to peacekeeping operations I am talking about. However, women are underrepresented, and their numbers are not increasing significantly in peacekeeping operations. We are looking into why this is so as there are many challenges faced by communities women are better suited to manage. Feminine leadership is different, as women are more

prone to accommodate the views of others. If there had been more women in peace negotiations, perhaps we would see more enduring solutions.

SY: In your view, what could be done to make peacekeeping operations and peace negotiations more gender-inclusive?

SH: In Bangladesh since 2007, we have been deploying women in peacekeeping operations. In 2016 in Cote d'Ivoire, we sent the first female ever in the history of UN peacekeeping operations as a contingent commander. And then in 2010, we sent an all-women police force to

Haiti. We need role models to inspire other women. Yes, there are challenges in our systems, be it in the UN, be it in Bangladesh, or be it in any other part of the world. Our systems are designed to address the needs of men. Women have entered many of these sectors at a later stage, and that's why these systems are still not very responsive to women's needs. So, at this stage, to be realistic, perhaps it would be challenging to change everything overnight, but what is possible is to bring more role models to inspire others.

Let me tell you that last year the UN had a target of 15% representation of women in peacekeeping operations. But all the countries participating in peacekeeping operations could not fulfill it. And we are still not able to do so, even today. We have to motivate women through role models who inspire them to dream and emulate their example. We may also need legal provisions to increase the number of women, as in Bangladesh, where we have a reserved quota for women creating gender-equitable opportunities. Our goal is to create an equitable society and to encourage more women to join these challenging and unconventional professions for women. Women role models can also play a proactive role through networks. They could create platforms where they can congregate, voice women's opportunities, their challenges, and solutions. Men should also be part of these networks. Women should engage with the men because it is the men, who in my opinion, can play the most catalytic role.

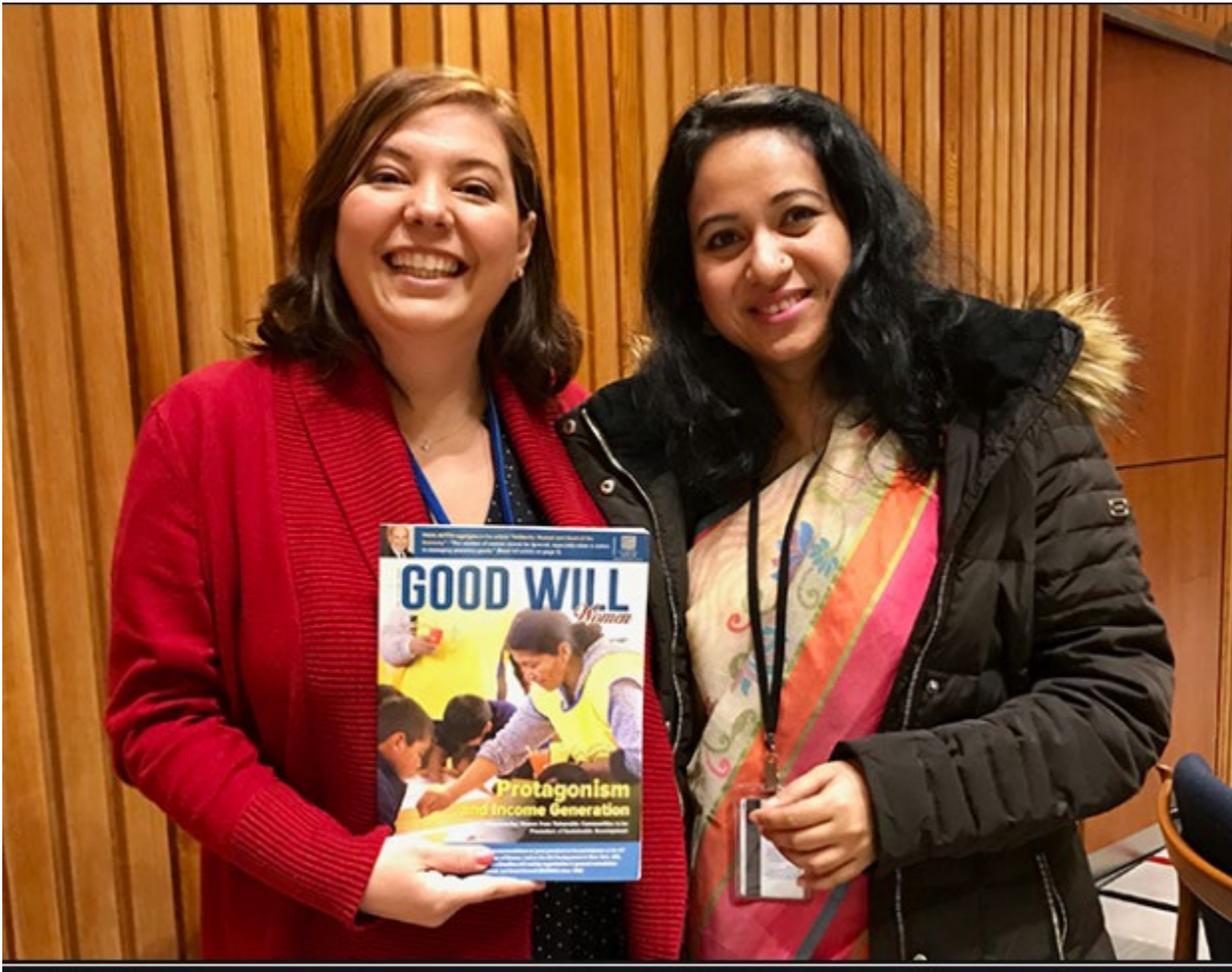
We also need more women in decision-making roles – it is imperative. If women are only in positions that cannot contribute to decision-making, then other women will also not be encouraged. And their fathers or husbands will also not be encouraged to support women in taking up such challenging professions. They will prefer to keep them in their conventional roles, to get married and raise families; it is deemed more comfortable and safe. Girl children need to be encouraged, and they must build confidence in their potential and capability to transcend socially constructed gender roles. My mother was only 16 years old and in 10th grade when she got married in 1972. The economic condition of the country was poor as it was war-ravaged and so her father married her off. But my mother was very keen to pursue her studies, and my father, despite all his difficulties and financial challenges, supported and encouraged her to become a lawyer. Male family members must demonstrate this type of confidence and faith in girls and women about their potential to contribute to society. We need more women in security sector institutions, in foreign ministries, and courts. To bring about change in society, one needs more women in the workplace, and they need to be encouraged.

SY: What advice would you give emerging female leaders in the Indo-Pacific region, assuming we asked you to mentor them based on your experiences?

SH: In the Indo-Pacific, very much my region, gender stereotyping is very common. I believe almost all governments are making efforts to change this. They are integrating more women in the workforce through gender mainstreaming, development, and opening up their access to education. Women must have access to quality education and skills. Equality cannot be achieved unless they have access to quality education. So, equality and quality are closely interconnected. Women must be able to use and love technology. They should enjoy working with machines, and equally, boys should have opportunities to enjoy the pleasure of cooking, to take pleasure in arts and culture. Rather than imposing socially constructed gender roles on individuals, we need to break the deeply entrenched stereotypes to bring societal change.

In the Indo-Pacific security structures, there are fewer women due to their backwardness in general. In some institutions, there are no barriers, per se. The barrier lies deep down in society; it is not visible. For example, physical strength and stamina are perceived as masculine traits, and therefore women are often considered unqualified for recruitment in a military's infantry or armored division. However, many women could successfully contribute to these structures through their skills in negotiation, communication, and as engineers and medical coders. In the Indo-Pacific region, there is a considerable number of women in military forces. However, they are often absent in infantry, particularly in the armored division. In my opinion, if more gender-responsive security structures are created, more women will join the service.

In the UN, there is an advisory, intergovernmental advisory body, the PBC (Peace Building Commission) advancing these objectives. Bangladesh is also an active member along with Canada in the steering committee of the Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations. This initiative considers the removal of barriers for women peacekeepers in their career progression, recruitment, and retention. There is another initiative Bangladesh is spearheading, the A4P (Action for Peacekeeping) WPS (Women, Peace, and Security) Warriors. Through these initiatives, what we are trying to implement the commitments that the UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security made about women's engagement in peace and conflict resolution. In Bangladesh last year, the National Action Plan for 1325 was adopted, recognizing our commitment to strengthen and accelerate more women's participation in peace processes. Governments play the most vital role in creating an enabling environment for women, and international cooperation is equally important to address their vulnerabilities in different development settings. International cooperation is essential to bringing change in developing countries.



Ms. Haque with a representative of the Civil Society Organizations Group for Financing for Development, UNHQs, New York, 22 April 2018.

SY: Bangladesh is one of the exemplars in women in development in South Asia. It's ahead of most South Asian countries, having been recognized by the UN for being remarkably on track in attaining several sustainable development goals. Do you have any final words for what the rest of the region can learn from Bangladesh?

SH: I take pride in the fact that our government played the most significant role. In Bangladesh in 1972, the architect of Bangladesh, the father of the nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, declared our women who faced violence in our war of independence as freedom fighters. In modern history, this was the first time a leader had recognized women subjected to violence as freedom fighters just like their male counterparts. Their war was a different type of war. So that was the beginning of the commitment of the government of Bangladesh to women's empowerment. Next year we are going to observe the 50th anniversary of our independence, and throughout this time, our society has had a liberal approach toward women. While we do experience societal gender-based violence and gender-stereotyping, but at the same time, our men are relatively more respectful to women compared to many other societies. There are constitutional

obligations, legal provisions, and institutional arrangements empowering Bangladeshi women. Our leading economic sector, the ready-made garments industry, is driven by women. Our agricultural sector has more women than men. Women are the drivers of change, and they are the drivers of our economy. These are examples other countries could follow. While we still have many challenges, we are not complacent. We believe that the main thrust of our commitment to women has to come from the government. All other actors and stakeholders join hands with the government in changing the situation of women in society.



Ms. Haque, chairing a meeting with delegates of various countries at the Permanent Mission of Bangladesh, New York, February 8, 2020.

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