Statement by the Minister of State
on the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women

Madam President, Ministers
Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen

I feel privileged today to represent Pakistan in this august gathering. I also wish to thank the President of the General Assembly H.E. Sheikha Haya Rashed Al-Khalifa for organizing this debate on the important subject of gender equality and empowerment of women.

Promotion of gender equality is being increasingly recognized as a cross cutting issue of today’s political, social and economic discourse. It has been ultimately realized after numerous discussions and debates that the progress and prosperity of humankind is inextricably linked to the empowerment of women that constitute half of the global population.

While today we are all sharing our national experiences in the realm of women empowerment, it should also be an occasion to reflect on key challenges and future directions to further enhance our collective action towards gender equality. In this context and as part of the ongoing UN Reform Process, we need to give due consideration to the High-level Panel’s proposal for establishing a gender entity with more resources and more autonomy to pursue the goal of gender mainstreaming.

I would like to take this opportunity to briefly share Pakistan’s experience in empowering our women in various walks of life.

Madam President, Distinguished delegates

The inspiration and guidance for gender equality in Pakistan come from our religion and the vision of our founding father Mohammad Ali Jinnah who enlightened us 60 years ago “No nation can rise to the height of glory unless your women are side by side with you”.

Following this vision, the constitution of Pakistan guarantees the equality of all its citizens before law, irrespective of religion, caste or gender. An independent National Commission on the Status of Women, set up in 2000, is continuously working towards the objective of ‘emancipation of women, providing them equalization of opportunities and improving the socio-economic conditions amongst women and men’.
There is also a dedicated Ministry for Women Development led by a Federal Minister, which has played an active role in providing policy level inputs on laws and regulations, which facilitate women to enter every walk of life.

Madam President

The Government of President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz has taken many concrete measures, both administrative and legal, to bring about substantive improvement in the lives of women in Pakistan.

These affirmative steps include a series of legal reforms like Amendment in the Citizenship Act of Pakistan, promulgation of Criminal Law Amendment Act, 2004 (known as honor killing law), Law Reforms Ordinance, 2006 granting the right of bail to women prisoners accused of all crimes except murder and terrorism and the recent historic adoption of the Protection of Women Act, 2006. The Protection of Women Act 2006 has been hailed as a milestone in the history of Pakistan as it seeks to eliminate historically entrenched exploitation and discrimination against women particularly to the victims of rape and sexual abuse. More laws are presently under consideration by the Parliament to outlaw the harmful cultural practices of early and forced marriages.

In addition to bringing about necessary amendments in existing laws and enactment of new laws, the government is taking parallel measures to raise the level of awareness and people’s accessibility for redressal of grievances by bringing an attitudinal change in the stereotypical mindset. This change- that of the mindset is actually a bigger challenge than the legislative changes. Acknowledging the role of media in this regard, a high level Media Awareness Campaign Committee, comprising of a Federal Minister and Members of Parliament has already started making positive contribution. Necessary changes are also being introduced in the school curricula to impart the lesson of gender equality to boy students at an early age.

In the political realm, Madam President, Pakistan is proud to have a mandatory 17% women’s representation in the National Parliament, which is the highest amongst the South Asian countries. Over and above, women are also eligible and encouraged to contest from general seats as they have already done this during this parliament, thus taking their representation in the National Parliament to 22%. There are also 28,000 women political leaders who constitute 33% of the representatives at the local government level, which is a testimony to the key role women play at the political arena and in decision- making in Pakistan.

In order to enhance the influence and decision making power of the female politicians and to enable them to address the needs of their constituencies, the Ministry of Women Development, with the assistance of UNDP, has introduced a unique capacity building project of Political School, which has proved very successful in the training of
women politicians at the grass root level. As a result of this intervention in its first phase, more than 40,000 women leaders were trained and are now playing a more proactive role in society.

Women’s share in public services, particularly their entry at the Higher Civil Services of the country has increased from 5 to 10% in the last four years. The strong affirmative and proactive policy for women, pursued at present, has started producing positive results by placing women at higher positions of office in various services. Women’s share in Pakistan Foreign Service, especially at ambassadorial positions, is also growing consistently. The Higher Judiciary has also established a tradition of inducting competent women as judges. With due encouragement of the Government, Pakistani women are now venturing into courageous fields of defence, air & space.

The private sector’s role in promoting women’s empowerment is also an emerging trend in Pakistan. The Federal Chamber of Commerce and Industry, together with the Ministry of Finance is playing its role as facilitator in this regard. Special Programmes in the Small and Medium Enterprise Development Sector have been set up to facilitate women to explore entrepreneurial activities. In Pakistan today some of our leading multinational companies and banks are being led by Women. The State Bank of Pakistan is also led by a dynamic, talented and highly experienced woman.

A major impediment to women empowerment is their limited access to credit. The Government looks at access to credit— especially to micro credit as a major tool for poverty alleviation and economic empowerment of women. In this regard, the Micro Finance Ordinance of 2001 was promulgated and two large scale programmes were started by the government— One, the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund, which provides credit to agencies and organizations to assist their institution building and ensures that access of women to this credit is widespread and equitable. Secondly, the Khushali Bank of Pakistan, which is a Microfinance Credit Retail Bank. Its outreach in the last four years of operation has exceeded three million women.

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen

During the past few years, there has been a major improvement in the education and socio political awakening of the women in Pakistan. Now women activities are no longer limited to housework and child-care. Their presence in factories, banks, mobile companies, government offices and the armed forces affirms the strides that the women of our country are making towards proving their mettle as individuals capable of great personal and professional achievements.

I thank you Madam President.