Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests, and fellow advocates for gender equality,

Good morning and welcome to this auspicious occasion of **International Women's Day 2025.** We gather here today in the beautiful Kingdom of Eswatini to celebrate the remarkable achievements of women across the globe and specifically India and Eswatini and we stand united, transcending borders, cultures, and backgrounds, to honor the indomitable spirit of womankind.

Today, we gather to celebrate a theme that resonates deeply with the principles of inclusivity, fairness, and empowerment: "For ALL Women and Girls: Rights, Equality, Empowerment." As we focus on this year's theme, it is essential to reflect on our two countries' journey towards women's empowerment—a journey that has been marked by significant milestones, steadfast determination, and inspiring stories of courage and resilience.

India's history is rich with narratives of powerful women who have made their mark in various fields. From ancient times, we find examples of women like Gargi and Maitreyi, who were revered scholars and philosophers in the Vedic era. The medieval period saw the rise of women rulers like Rani Lakshmibai, whose bravery in the face of adversity continues to inspire generations. These historical figures remind us that the seeds of empowerment were sown long ago and have continued to grow, albeit with challenges, through the ages.

The struggle for women's rights in India gained significant momentum during the 19th and 20th centuries. Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Jyotirao Phule, and Savitribai Phule played pivotal roles in advocating for women's education and the abolition of regressive practices like Sati and child marriage. Their efforts laid the foundation for a more progressive society where women could aspire to lead lives of dignity and independence.

The Indian independence movement further galvanized the cause of women's empowerment. Women like Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, and Aruna Asaf Ali emerged as prominent leaders in the fight for freedom. Their participation in the struggle was not just symbolic but instrumental in challenging colonial rule and advocating for social justice. The inclusion of women's rights in the discourse of independence underscored the belief that a free India must also be an equitable India.

Post-independence, the Indian Constitution enshrined the principles of equality and non-discrimination, providing a robust framework for promoting women's rights. The efforts of pioneering women like Dr. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, India's first Health Minister, and Hansa Mehta, a member of the Constituent Assembly, ensured that gender equality was a cornerstone of our democratic republic. The constitutional commitment to equal rights set the stage for a series of legislative measures aimed at safeguarding women's interests.

Over the years, India has witnessed significant progress in various areas concerning women's empowerment. The Right to Education Act, enacted in 2009, has played a crucial role in increasing the enrollment of girls in schools and reducing the gender gap in education. Initiatives like the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter) campaign have further emphasized the importance of educating and empowering girls.

Economic empowerment has been another critical area of focus. The introduction of the MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) has provided employment opportunities for women in rural areas, enabling them to contribute to their families' income and gain financial independence. Women-centric schemes like the Jan Dhan Yojana and the MUDRA (Micro Units Development and Refinance Agency) scheme have facilitated access to banking services and entrepreneurship opportunities for women, particularly from marginalized communities.

In the political arena, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which mandated the reservation of one-third of seats for women in local self-governments, have been instrumental in increasing women's participation in governance. Women leaders at the grassroots level have emerged as powerful agents of change, advocating for issues like sanitation, healthcare, and education in their communities.

However, the journey towards complete empowerment is far from over. Despite these achievements, women continue to face numerous challenges, including gender-based violence, discrimination, and limited access to opportunities. It is imperative that we address these issues with a sense of urgency and collective responsibility.

The theme of this year's International Women's Day, "For ALL Women and Girls: Rights, Equality, Empowerment," calls for an inclusive approach that recognizes the diverse experiences and challenges faced by women and girls across different socio-economic, cultural, and geographical backgrounds. It urges us to ensure that our efforts to empower women are not just limited to a select few but extend to every woman and girl, regardless of her circumstances.

To achieve this, we must adopt a multi-faceted approach that includes:

1. **Education and Awareness:** Promoting gender-sensitive education and raising awareness about women's rights is crucial for changing societal attitudes and eradicating deep-rooted biases. We must ensure that schools and educational institutions are safe spaces where girls can learn and thrive without fear of discrimination or harassment.
2. **Legal Reforms:** Strengthening and implementing laws that protect women's rights is essential for creating a safe and just society. This includes stringent measures against gender-based violence, workplace harassment, and

discrimination. Legal literacy programs can empower women to understand and assert their rights.

3. **Economic Empowerment:** Providing women with access to resources, skills training, and economic opportunities. Economic empowerment of women significantly impacts a country's GDP growth in numerous ways:

1. **Increased Labor Force Participation**: When women are economically empowered, more of them join the workforce. This expands the labor pool and increases productivity, directly contributing to economic growth.
2. **Enhanced Productivity**: Empowered women often gain access to education, training, and resources, enabling them to perform more effectively in various industries. This leads to a more skilled and efficient workforce.
3. **Boost in Entrepreneurship**: Women who have access to financial resources and opportunities are more likely to start businesses. This not only creates jobs but also fosters innovation and economic diversification.
4. **Improved Household Spending**: Women are more likely to reinvest their earnings into their families, enhancing health, education, and well-being. This creates a ripple effect on economic stability and growth.
5. **Reduction of Poverty**: Empowering women helps lift families out of poverty, increasing the overall standard of living. This, in turn, drives consumer demand and stimulates economic activity.
6. **Demographic Dividend**: As women gain access to reproductive healthcare and education, fertility rates often decline. This can lead to a more balanced population structure, with a larger proportion of the population being economically productive.

Studies have shown that closing gender gaps in labor force participation and wages can substantially increase a country's GDP. For instance, the McKinsey Global Institute estimated that advancing gender equality could add $12 trillion to global GDP by 2025.

Here are some examples of how women's economic empowerment has contributed to GDP growth in **India.**

1. **Increased Workforce Participation**: Over the past six years, India's female labor force participation rate has risen significantly, from 23.3% to 41.7%. This increase has been driven by government initiatives like the *Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana* (PMMY), which provides collateral-free loans to women entrepreneurs.
2. **Government Schemes**: Programs such as *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* and *Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana* have focused on education and financial inclusion for women, enabling them to contribute more effectively to the economy.
3. **Entrepreneurship**: Women-led startups and small businesses have flourished, thanks to mentorship and venture capital support. This has not only created jobs but also diversified India's economic landscape.

   In this regard, I would like to highlight India’s partnership with Eswatini especially the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme which has several such specially designed programmes for capacity building which are fully funded by the Government of India. These are fully funded courses in entrepreneurship, self-employment at grassroots etc.which have contributed immensely to empowerment of women in Africa and which we would encourage our sisters in Eswatini to take advantage of.

The story of women’s struggle for equality belongs to all of us. It transcends borders, organizations, and individual efforts.

Today, let us amplify our voices, break barriers, and inspire inclusion. When we do so, we create a world where every woman's potential is realized, where diversity is celebrated, and where no one is left behind.

As we celebrate International Women's Day, let us honor the legacy of those who fought for women's empowerment. Let us continue this journey, ensuring that every woman realizes her self-worth, abilities, and right to shape society. Together, we can build a world where every woman thrives, and no one is left behind. Collective efforts propel us toward a future where gender equality is not just a dream but a reality.

Amandla!

Happy International Women's Day to all!