

Opening Remarks at Women's Leadership Forum

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Distinguished guests, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great honor to welcome you all on behalf of the United Board to Women's Leadership Forum. I want to thank Ginling College of Nanjing Normal University and Wesley Foundation for co-sponsoring and co-organizing this forum with the United Board. It is quite fitting that this forum is being held at Ginling College given its role as the first institution to grant bachelor's degrees to female students in China and its long-standing close cooperation with the United Board.

Since its founding, the United Board has been committed to education that develops the whole person – intellectually, spiritually, and ethically. We have worked with more than 80 institutions of higher education, from 14 countries and regions, providing scholarships, fellowships, training, professional development, and project grants to promote whole person education in Asia. One of our focus is on women's whole person education and leadership development. We are dedicated to creating and sustaining a community of women leaders through leadership development programs that build leadership capacity for women from our network institutions.

We established this forum to provide an opportunity to share experience and thinking about the future of women's colleges as well as women's education in the Asian context. Our distinguished participants mostly are presidents / principals of women colleges and universities. Some are presidents or academic leaders of co-ed universities exerting unremitting effort towards women empowerment.

As we all know, aside from allowing more women access to higher education, women's colleges and universities are in a unique position to educate women for leadership. Inspired by role models and mentors, young women in the affirming and liberating atmosphere can develop confidence, self-efficacy, and talent more freely, less burdened by cultural stereotypes and social pressures.

The value of women's education and leadership development has received widespread recognition in Asia over decades. Governments, institutions and organizations in Asia have implemented policies and practices aimed at improving diversity and equity, Take China for instance. Since 2008, Chinese women have been more likely than men to continue onto tertiary and postgraduate education. According to the Ministry of Education, women constitutes 52.5 percent of undergraduate students in China's colleges and universities in 2018.

Despite positive outcomes, the climate on Asian campuses has not reached desirable levels of gender fairness. Women's chance for higher

education is still restrained by tradition, culture, religion, and economic circumstances. Women continue to fall behind their male colleagues in progressing towards leadership. Gender imbalance among senior university academics remains an acknowledged problem. Take East Asia for example. There is a high number of women exceeding greatly in academia but most of them are unable to break the ceiling to the top leadership positions. Women education and leadership development have a long way to go.

The advent of a global digital age created new challenges for women. Digitalization is characterized by artificial intelligence, big data, cloud computing and mobile robotics. It is likely to improve female participation in labor markets, financial markets, and entrepreneurship. A 2017 WEF report noted that women set up 55% of new internet companies in China, However, current gender inequalities may prevent more women from fully benefiting from the opportunities offered by digitalization. The WEF reported in late 2018 that there is a considerable risk that growing demand for AI skills could “perpetuate — and even widen — the sort of gender and equity gaps that often impact the technology sector.” Lower female enrolment rates in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics deters women from fully realizing their potential in promising jobs or entrepreneurial opportunities of the digital age.

In terms of all these trends, there are deeply concerned issues that have to be addressed in detail.

First and foremost, women's institutions still have a vital role to play in educating and inspiring tomorrow's leaders. But how to carry out the legacy of creating welcoming campus climates for female students and helping them develop the confidence they need to take risks and push boundaries? Innovative efforts should be made to structure leadership development into the curriculum and co-curriculum, through the whole person education. It is important for women to feel consistently supported and motivated to transform their skills and competencies in workplace, make well-informed decisions, and achieve a better balance in their personal and professional lives.

Furthermore, we also need to get women better prepared for new requirements on labor markets of the digital age. Initiatives should be launched to foster female digital literacy and entrepreneurship. More women should be encouraged to enter tertiary education and STEM occupations, unleashing their talent in learning new digital technology, and enhancing their economic and social autonomy.

The need of discussing these issues has drawn all of us to this Women Leadership Forum. We have brought with us unique expertise and experience, the strategies that we have used to overcome negative effects of environmental barriers, and the approaches we have adopted to prepare

for the education of future generations. The forum allows us to share diverse perspectives and insights with our counterparts, learn from each other's leadership journey and good practices, and identify ways to cope with new challenges. It provides a great opportunity to build a network of personal relationships, to work together closely and make progress effectively, to strive with all our combined strength, for cultural, attitudinal and structural changes that ensure equal opportunities and a more representative leadership in the sector of higher education and in society as a whole.

Let us make the most of the forum. I wish you all an engaging, constructive and very enjoyable event. Thank all of you for being part of the wonderful event.