

World Women's Congress:
Opening Speech
By Dean Chang PilWha, Convener

Honorable First Lady Kwon Yang Sook, Your Excellency, President of the Pan African parliament, Gertrude Mongella, distinguished guests, friends.

Last night, as I watched the performance, "She is Coming" I was reminded of how women throughout history have overcome failure and despair by caring for one other. The stronger carried the weak, the old made way for the young. And as the drama of our struggles unfolded, I recognized the true strength of our movement—sheer faith. How else can we explain our audacity? We truly believe that the weak —through collective action—can empower the world.

Gathered here this morning are over 2000 participants who are seeking new answers and strategies to achieve gender justice. You are men and women who have come from nearly 90 countries. You represent the brilliant minds, persevering researchers, educators, artists and culture makers of the women's movement. You are outstanding citizens, NGO leaders, young feminists and eager students.

What is our task? Every three years, this interdisciplinary congress on women offers us a chance to think together as a unified but diverse intellectual community. For one week, we have a unique opportunity to cross the boundaries between East and West, North and South, between disciplines, social and political identities. Our organizing committee chose to express our congress as an "interdisciplinary congress on women" because women's studies are a trans-disciplinary orientation that must combine research with practice as well as policy making.

We have chosen 20 sub-themes to focus our discussions. These includes NGOs and activism, globalization, race and ethnicity, gender and Information- Communications- Technologies, religion, environment and agriculture, peace, war and conflict, health and sports, culture and creativity, law and human rights, gender and science, and sexuality. In the plenary sessions, we will discuss problems of economic ethics, changing paradigms of the state and leadership.

Of these, let me emphasize one point that is dear to my heart—peace and environmental security. I believe it is imperative that we recognize our mutual interdependence—of human beings with other each other and all of nature. As the last remaining bastion of the Cold War,

and cruelly divided between North and South, Korea is a nation waiting for a lasting peace. Koreans have experienced the damaging effects of the Second World War as well as the Korean War. The country lay in ecological ruin as beautiful mountains eroded from deforestation. Damage to biodiversity was irreversible and poverty-driven urbanization created polluted waters unfit for human use. If you add to this environmental disaster, a devastated economy, you can understand why reconstruction of our society has been a long and hard struggle. For years under authoritarian rule, human rights, ethical relationships, and the arts were pushed aside in the name of political security. The same arguments were made for the sake of economic growth. In almost Darwinian fashion, we witnessed the sacrifice of the weaker members of society. At the bottom were poor mothers, daughters and sisters who labored for their families as householders, farmers and factory girls and maids.

With the democratization of South Korea, consciousness about the rights of all men and women to the fruits of social and economic development has been raised. Throughout the 1980's, NGOs and the media worked together with political leaders to combat violence against women, change family law, and address problems of poverty. We have succeeded in rewriting the civil codes and creating new mechanisms within government such as the ministry of gender equality. Korea women also experienced a cultural revolution that has resulted in the flourishing of women's film festivals, art exhibits, music and dance.

In this endeavor, women's studies emerged as a strong partner. It gave women confidence to step out into the political and cultural arena as leaders and provided them with a space for personal liberation. It also challenged western paradigms to guide researches that were culturally and socially relevant to the Asian context.

While much has been achieved over the past thirty years, many Korean women are seeking a vision for the future. Shedding our images as victims, we must now step out to claim our rights to govern and find solutions. This includes our acknowledgement that the region and rest of the world are a part of our political universe. Achieving peace and environmental security here requires us to identify policies that will work not only in Korea but throughout the world. That is why an international perspective in women's studies is increasingly critical. We have to look at the root causes of inequality affecting all men, women and children. Together, we need to take strong stands on what world leaders must do to address these issues. I am encouraged whenever I see an example of women who are claiming their rights to speak out on globalization. For example, last week, at the G-8 economic powerhouse meeting, a group of women leaders presented their own recommendations on international trade, finance, and banking. In other instances, Korean women have worked with international NGOs and women's studies centers to advocate for policies at the UN. We must ask ourselves how

women's studies can further strengthen women's voices at meetings of the IMF, WTO and World Bank. It is a tall order, but if we do not take this challenge, we must ask ourselves—who will?

I am sure that we are all anxious to begin our work together. But before I end my discourse, let me take time to acknowledge those who have helped make this event a reality. These are the Korean Association of Women's Studies and Ewha Womans' University who, jointly with efforts of Yonsei, Sogang and Sookmyung Universities, organized this congress. The First lady, the Ministry of Gender Equality, Seoul Metropolitan city along with private sector and media sponsors have generously provided financial and social support-- and we thank them. Through the efforts of hundreds of organizers and volunteers, the stage has been set for a dramatic and historic event—**our** 9th Interdisciplinary Congress on Women. We now invite you—the principle directors and actors—to step into the limelight and create a brilliant scenario.