

Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

**UNIFEM Canada 2007 Awards Banquet
Ottawa**

November 21, 2007

President Farag, honoured guests, colleagues, ladies & gentlemen:

When I was asked to be the honorary Chair of the 2007 UNIFEM Canada Awards banquet, I was delighted to accept. Not only do I fully support the objectives of the United Nations Development Fund for Women, I have the great pleasure of being personally acquainted with the work of this year's laureate, Nurjehan Mawani. Nurjehan is a dear friend and a true champion of women's empowerment throughout the world. She understands the important role that women need to play in bringing about positive, long-term change.

Each year, the Canadian Committee for the United Nations Development Fund for Women honours a Canadian who has made an outstanding contribution to the advancement of women. This year, Nurjehan Mawani joins the illustrious company of many others, including Carolyn McAskie, Pamela Wallin, and the Honourable Flora MacDonald.

Following her many years of distinguished public service with Canadian government organizations, Nurjehan's latest challenge is that of representing the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) in the Kyrgyz Republic. She joined the Aga Khan Development Network in 2005, following a distinguished career with the Public Service in Canada.

It was during her tenure as a Commissioner with the Public Service, that I first met Nurjehan. We found we shared a common interest in advocating for a Public Service that was truly reflective of all aspects of Canada's diverse population.

During the 1990s, Nurjehan served as Chairperson of Canada's Immigration and Refugee Board, where she helped women in the world fleeing oppression by issuing the groundbreaking "Guidelines on Women Refugee Claimants Fearing Gender-Related Persecution." The Guidelines were the first of their kind in the world, and were hailed by the United

Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). They resulted in similar changes by other nations to account for the unique challenges faced by women refugees. Countless women refugees who have entered Canada on the basis of these guidelines owe their lives to Nurjehan's accomplishments.

I suspect that Nurjehan's commitment to human rights, and to the empowerment of women through education, resulted from her upbringing. She grew up in Mombasa, Kenya, in a family that emphasized the values of the Ismaili faith, as well as the importance of education. As a result, Nurjehan studied law in London, England. Her own experience, and those of many Ismailis, point to the transformative power of education, particularly for women.

Upon arriving in Canada, Nurjehan came to appreciate a young nation whose very foundation depends on emphasizing the collective benefits of a pluralistic society. It is for this reason that His Highness, the Aga Khan, has decided to establish the Global Centre for Pluralism here in Ottawa, with support from the Canadian government.

On a personal basis, I can relate to Nurjehan's experiences. I also grew up in a family and culture that values education. I came to Canada in my teens to go to university. Over the years, I realized that Canada is a country where many women have come to escape oppression. As Canadians, we must not forget those women in the world who are not as fortunate as we are.

Women are essential to the societal development process. Educated women will have educated children; women who are impacted dramatically by conflict need to take part in bringing peace to war-torn countries, and all women have an integral role to play in good governance, which is essential to development.

Nurjehan's current work with the Aga Khan Development Network in the Kyrgyz Republic in bringing education to young women is crucial in that part of the world. I cannot think of a better or more qualified person to undertake this task. Not only is Nurjehan very talented, she has devoted her life to helping others. The Award she is receiving this evening follows many other awards over the years, as well as on her appointment to the Order of

Canada. I believe Nurjehan's real reward is the great impact she is making in the lives of women.

It is now my pleasure to invite the President of UNIFEM Canada, Fred Farag, to join me in presenting the UNIFEM Canada Award to Nurjehan Mawani, for her distinguished contributions to the advancement of women.