Good morning and welcome to this the second day of this very exciting Global Forum of Women Political Leaders.

My name is Sharon Bessell and I am from the Centre for Democratic Institutions, which is Australia’s leading democracy promotion organisation. The Centre is based at the Australian National University and funded through the AusAID, the Australian Government’s overseas development assistance agency.

May I begin by thanking Irene Santiago, Zony Wood and the organising committee for their hard work in making this event happen and for the wonderful hospitality they have shown us here in the Philippines – a country famous for its hospitality and friendliness. May I also thank the Forum’s Patron, President Corozon Aquino, and the sponsors for their support of this important event.

Yesterday we began to look towards the future and to discuss the ways in which women leaders can, in the twenty-first century, access power and contribute to the betterment, perhaps the transformation, of their communities: both globally and locally. And listening to the inspirational women leaders who have come to this forum from around the world, one can not help but feel optimistic about the future.

And yet we also know only too well of the barriers and obstacles facing women. There have certainly been considerable gains over the past century, but women remain grossly under-represented in parliaments around the world and the opportunity for women to participate in formal decision making processes remains limited. On average around the world, women comprise only about thirteen percent of parliamentarians. As Dr Pippa Norris reminded us yesterday, at the current rate of progress it will take many, many decades before the number of women in political leadership reaches parity with men. At this rate my great-great granddaughter could be making a speech at the end of this century – the twenty-first century – calling for equal representation and participation of women in formal political processes. Few of us, I think we can agree, are prepared to wait for such a slow evolution.

And so, we must learn from one another, set our goals and ensure that they are reached. We must strategise! Fora like this one and the opportunity to write a declaration and input into Beijing +5 are vitally important. And perhaps, as we listen and discuss, we can keep our minds focused on concrete steps forward. The spread of democracy around the world offers women and opportunity to engage in politics as never before. Yet we also know that democracy does not always serve women’s interests and does not automatically guarantee women access to political power. We need to identify how democratic forms of government can be harnessed by women and made deliver the equality of representation and political participation that genuine democracy promises.
While we must think broadly and strategically, we must also occupy our minds with detail: Which electoral systems are most accessible, most friendly to women? How can the increasing number of democracy-promotion organisations around the world facilitate the political participation of women? What should we be demanding of the IMF, the World Bank, of UN agencies promoting good governance, and various political groupings such as APEC, ASEAN or the Inter-Parliamentary Union? How can we use the various political commitments and declarations that have already been made – the New Delhi Declaration of the Inter-Parliamentary Union for example?

At the beginning of the twenty-first century our task, our challenge, is twofold. On the one hand, we need to continue to struggle to increase the numbers of women in positions of power. Numbers do remain vital. But our second task is to broaden our focus beyond numbers to ask how women on reaching power can be effective leaders and how policies and budgets can be made accountable to the interests of women. And I need not remind anyone here of the extent to which that accountability is lacking. That women remain the poorest of the world’s poor – representing 70 percent of those living in absolute poverty in the world today – is a stark reminder of this. And of course this is but one of a long list of indicators that demonstrate deep and ongoing gender-based discrimination. As we think about strategies through which more women can achieve positions of political power, we also ask how such power could be harnessed to deal with the pressing problems facing many women every day of their lives.

We heard President Aquino say yesterday that holding on to power in the face of illegitimate challenges was a greater challenge than actually achieving power. While not all women leaders – thankfully – are subject to attempted coups d’etat, the challenge of providing effective leadership is often daunting. As the current Vice President of the Philippines noted yesterday, women often need to perform twice as well as men to be accepted as equals. Unfortunately such expectation remains the reality and the burden for many women leaders.

At this forum we are privileged to have in attendance many women who are leaders in their fields. And we have the opportunity to share experiences and views about what comprises effective political leadership; how obstacles can be overcome; how challenges can be met.

And now it is my great privilege to introduce our keynote speaker this morning. Dr Wan Azizah wan Ismail is a member of the Malaysian Parliament and President of the National Justice Party. She is an ophthalmologist by training and mother of six. Yesterday she described herself to me as an ‘accidental politician’. Dr Azizah’s husband, Anwar Ibrahim, was the politician of the family – a politician widely respected for his thoughtful intelligence and progressive views. As deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim was widely seen as a central figure in his country’s democratic future. When he was dismissed from office and gaoled his wife Dr Azizah stepped forward and took on the responsibility of political leadership herself. Dr Azizah has said that she feels an affinity with Corazon Aquino, and like President Aquino, Dr Azizah has demonstrated how effective women can be as political leaders. Like President Aquino, Dr Azizah has been prepared to take up and to meet the challenges presented at a time when her nation meets her most.