

Speech of Dr. Sania Nishtar at the 2017 World Health Assembly

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is truly a privilege to be addressing you today as nominee for DG WHO, the world's leading health agency.

My journey to this point has not been easy.

I had a happy childhood growing up in northern Pakistan. But when I was 15, I woke up one day and the world I knew had changed as my father suddenly died of a heart attack.

I grew up overnight and I balanced looking after the family with studying hard. I eventually topped my class at college and went on to become the first woman cardiologist in Pakistan.

I used to spend a lot of time talking to patients about the barriers they faced when trying to seek healthcare.

And then one incident changed the course of my career

It was when the hospital where I worked asked doctors to use recycled catheters for patients who could not pay

That day I decided I would not proceed with business as usual

So I embarked on a journey to find a solution

That journey has taken me from patients to governance and systems

From hospitals to board rooms

From the civil society to a ministerial role

From founding grass roots institutions to chairing multilateral initiatives—and eventually to this podium seeking your vote to lead WHO

During this journey, I discovered that the road to addressing any systemic problem must have honesty as its starting point. I will come to this point later.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

As the World's only multilateral agency WHO has the potential to protect the world against threats that can wipe out the development gains of the last century—risks such as pandemic flu/disease outbreak, antimicrobial resistance and the global epidemic of non-communicable diseases

But we must recognize the agency is at a cross roads with reforms in their initial stages and a dramatic context shift - from the MDGs to the SDGs - with ongoing humanitarian crises, aging populations, and emerging pathogens.

So, the discussion about the future of the organization is of critical significance at this juncture.

Over the past year and a half, I have met most of you. You have welcomed me to your countries, we have spoken candidly at regional committee meetings and here in Geneva.

I have also come to realize that we share many hopes and concerns

My vision for a new WHO aims to deliver on these hopes and address your concerns

Today, I am asking you to choose me as your Director-General

Not because I am a woman and women make up less than 25% of the UN agency heads, and fewer than 10 percent of heads of states globally

Not because there has never been a DG from the WHO EMRO region, South Asia or from the OIC.

I am asking for your vote because I can deliver constructive and sustainable change—and I know that is what you want too

Let me outline the four key roles of the director General, and why I fit them

The first is the role of a **Convener for the world's parliament for health**—that role entails building consensus between member states on often polarizing issues. This is a role I have played all my life and has been evidenced most recently as co-chair of the WHO Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity.

The second, is a **CEO's role**, putting systems in place, hiring on merit, creating a performance enabling environment and institutionalizing accountability and transparency.

Here you may want to note that my accountability and transparency credentials were recognized as minister and in by the UN System when I was asked to chair the Independent Accountability Panel for Women and Children's health

I have built institutions from scratch. “Value for money” and partnerships are nice jargon for candidates, but they only become second nature when you have built organizations in difficult and resource-constrained environments.

Third, is the role the **global guardian of health**—a leader who understands where to take an independent position—and here I am sure you know my civil society background, I have led on hard issues from corruption to reform all my life as a civil society activist
And the fourth role is that of a **global health Leader**

A leader who inspires trust

A leader who has the ability to work with both low and high income countries, as I do.

I have real developing country experience. I have had to work in operation theaters without electricity and gloves, I have had to sew up gunshot wounds in war torn areas, tend to ruptured uteruses, and see healthcare challenges in the large migration wave in history.

At the same time, I am deeply familiar policy priorities and challenges of developed countries.

NCDs, which are already a global epidemic, are an example of epidemic affecting all countries. This has been my life’s work.

WHO also needs a global leader who bridges issues, has the ability to work with all stakeholders with respect and integrity and can deliver innovation - without which we can achieve the SDGs.

In a world where billions of people are connected with mobile devices, where process innovations inevitably work for the private sector, we must be making some very serious mistakes to be living in a world where every minute a woman dies from preventable causes and where half the world’s population infested with worms.

It is shameful to have health systems fuel corruption when solutions exist to eliminate virtually every issue plaguing them.

With my civil society background, I have the ability to work with all stakeholders, I have the ability to join the dots between medicine science systems, innovations, policy. I have been awarded the global innovation award for my ability to think laterally, I can and will reimagine health for all.

WHO is a massive change agent. Few realize that it touches every life on earth.

Its norms determine if the right medicine will be available on the shelf in village to stop young women from bleeding to death after childbirth

Its guidelines mandate blood pressure screening for prevent millions from crippling heart failure

Its advocacy can help spread UHC to the hundreds of millions that still can't access health.

It determines whether new antibiotics will be on the shelf 10 years from now and if drugs for diseases of the poor will be available in the next century.

I am committed to tapping the full potential of the organization, I am committed to real change—to get the basic key elements right

Each one of you here knows, that I have not pre-selected DDG and ADG, my hands are free to hire best senior management team. I will publish a process for initiating a transparent call for nominations within days of being elected

Starting on day 1

I will convene an emergency pandemic preparedness to review our standard operating procedures; I am carefully lessons from last week's recent Ebola outbreak

I will draw up a plan to accelerate reforms on which member states have invested so much time

I will set up a resource mobilization unit, commence work to develop a new resource mobilization and communications strategy,

I will put in place a Delivery Unit and establish priority metrics and will commence work towards accountability compacts with senior management

I will bring a new model of staff engagement—starting with respect

Within 100 days,

I will put in place a process to operationalize my/our vision for a NEW WHO to focus WHO on its core mandates and build partnerships which leverage comparative advantages to deliver on the SDGs

And I will increase value addition for member states

As DG I will come to your capitals not to cut ribbons but to be on your side and to amplify your voice when you are seeking parliamentary approval for UHC and for IHR implementation.

I will be by your side when you ask your finance ministers for budgets to implement UHC.

I will be by your side in a crisis, when you face the media in your countries in tough situations.

My first visits as DG would be to the smallest Island developing countries to stand in solidarity and raise global attention about the dramatic effects of climate change on the small islands.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

We must all be clear that WHO has the unique mandate to protect the world against a cataclysmic event. It has happened before – and it can happen again.

Spanish flu killed 30 million in 1918 and if such an infectious agent strikes the world in today's world of intercontinental travel, projections are that half a billion people could die, the world could be thrown into a spiraling recession. WHO has to be ready 24/7 to respond quickly and effectively.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We talk about issues in the UN system behind closed doors
We all know what the real problems are in this very organization

We must have the courage to change that

As wise man once said, in order to predict what someone will do in the future, just look at what they have done in the past.

I have been global in my outlook all my life and have demonstrated it in this campaign. We are more than a collection of 194 flags—we are an interconnected world. I will be a DG for All.

I can promise you that I will run WHO with the same principles like I have run my campaign. It's been cost effective, fully transparent and with integrity and respect for all.

My hands are clean coming out of the election process—I have the ability to accelerate the reforms you have championed.

The time for action is now.

This will be your historic vote put health over politics and put regionalism aside.

I am offering you a new deal for health. One where WHO regains the world's trust and protects the health of all people everywhere.

You can make a difference. Right here. Right now.

Thank you.