

Progress achieved in India highlights benefits of quotas for women, says UN official



UN Women Executive Director Michelle Bachelet. Photo: UN Women/Rick Bajornas

3 October 2012 – A top United Nations official today strongly encouraged governments to adopt special temporary measures, such as quotas, to boost the number of women in parliament and decision-making positions, pointing to the progress achieved by women in India as a result of affirmative action.

“Here in India, quotas have spurred one of the world’s greatest successes in women’s empowerment and grassroots democracy,” Michelle Bachelet said in her keynote [address](#) to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Conference of Women Speakers of Parliament, held in the capital, New Delhi.

Ms. Bachelet, the Executive Director of the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women ([UN Women](#)), highlighted India's efforts to advance gender equality and women's empowerment, stating that the successes of the world's largest democracy can serve as an example to others.

Ten years ago women comprised less than five per cent of elected leaders in village councils in India; today, more than 40 per cent of local council leaders are women. "This dramatic and rapid change is the result of quotas," said Ms. Bachelet, who is on an official visit to the country.

Globally, however, women – who constitute 51 per cent of the world's population – are under-represented in the representative bodies that make key decisions affecting their lives. Currently, women average a mere 20 per cent of parliamentarians worldwide.

"That is why I am a strong advocate for affirmative action, for temporary special measures, such as quotas, until we have a level playing field," said Ms. Bachelet.

She highlighted the Women's Reservation Bill, passed by the upper house of India's Parliament, that would set aside one-third of the elected seats for women in the lower house of the Parliament and in all legislative assemblies.

"If it becomes law, it could potentially lead to one of the most significant changes in India since independence in 1947," she stated. "It will send a strong message to the women of India. And it will send a strong message to the world that India is leading the way for democracy, for women and for equality."

Last year, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution to increase women's political participation, and the Executive Director reported that, one year later, progress is being made.

From Algeria to Libya to Senegal, more women serve as representatives in their national parliaments, Ms. Bachelet said. The number of countries reaching the 30 per cent mark of women in parliament has risen from 27 to 33, and 30 of these countries achieved this through temporary special measures such as quotas.

"It is a matter of straightforward justice, and it is also a matter of improving the democratic quality of representation. By having more women as legislators, more concerns – different concerns, will be brought to the public arena to respond to the diverse needs of society," she stated.

Women leaders, she noted, have proved themselves to be strong advocates for many issues including girls' education, clean water and sanitation, sustainable energy, decent work, healthcare, and pensions for the elderly.

"Having more women in politics also has a positive effect in terms of creating positive role models and a new vision of the future and what is possible," stated Ms. Bachelet.

Also today, Ms. Bachelet met with private sector leaders at a high-level event hosted by the Confederation of Indian Industry, at which she noted that research shows that unleashing

women's full economic potential by removing barriers and supporting equal opportunity increases growth and performance.

“Having more women in company boards, in senior management, supervisory positions and workers in the formal sector is not only the right thing to do, but the smart thing to do,” she said. “It’s good for the bottom line.”

The UN official added that increasing women’s economic role is important for India and it is good for women and good for business. It is about engaging the productive capacity, creativity and talent of half the population, she noted, and maximizing their role and rights as formal sector workers in agriculture, manufacturing and services sectors as well as increasing their purchasing power as consumers.

“As a major economic force worldwide, India and Indian companies have the opportunity to set the standards in Asia in terms of women’s right to decent work,” said Ms. Bachelet.

During her three-day visit, the Executive Director will also launch a Regional Centre of Excellence for elected women representatives at the local level, during the National Leadership Summit hosted by the Indian Government in the city of Jaipur.

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