UN Women Executive Director Michelle Bachelet visits India

UN Women South Asia is pleased to share the fourth e-newsletter. This special issue contains highlights from UN Women Executive Director Michelle Bachelet’s first official visit to India & South Asia in October 2012. Not only did the Executive Director meet with the President of India, and other senior dignitaries during her visit, but she was able to interact with leaders from civil society, business and with women leaders from across South Asia.

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UN Women Executive Director launches first ever knowledge hub for elected women representatives living in rural areas of South Asia

Jaipur, 4 October 2012: In partnership with Governments across South Asia, UN Women’s Executive Director Michelle Bachelet and four elected women representatives from South Asia launched the first ever knowledge hub for elected women representatives in rural areas across the region.

Unveiled in the presence of more than 200 women leaders, experts and policy makers, the knowledge hub will use audio and video content in different languages to reach women leaders in remote areas, cutting past literacy and linguistic barriers.

“This is a huge leap forward for women leaders across South Asia.”

“The Regional Centre for Excellence will ensure that much needed information is available to them in different languages. This will undoubtedly strengthen their leadership and provide them with skills to perform their roles more effectively,” said Ms. Bachelet.

Also present at the launch was Bhavana Damor, a three-term sarpanch (village head) from Rampur Mewada Gram Panchayat (village council) in Rajasthan. “Greater access to information will help us serve our communities more effectively. If our women decide to stand on their own feet, then development will be for all within the community,” said Ms. Damor.

Women from Bhutan or Madhya Pradesh will be able to share their experiences by uploading audio-visual content on mobiles using an interactive application, Wi-Net. Zareena Begum from Mahboobnagar in Andhra Pradesh is one of the fifty women who have already used the mobile application. “We are finally able to air our problems and concerns through this application. We just hope someone is listening so that they can be solved,” she said.

The centre was launched during a day-long Leadership Summit titled Dialogue for Change:
Women in Politics, Policies and Livelihoods, and was attended by senior leaders and delegates from India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. In a message, Krishna Tirath, Hon’ble Minister for Women and Child Development, Government of India, acknowledged the role that the Centre would play in empowering and educating women to become efficient leaders.

Hon’ble Minister Kishore Chandra Deo, Minister of Panchayati Raj and Tribal Affairs, also conveyed his support: “The key challenges in India are mainly the low level of literacy among women and low level of women’s political participation. To overcome them, the Regional Centre of Excellence needs to focus on providing knowledge through different sources.”

Women’s representation in national parliaments stands between 4 to 34 per cent across countries in South Asia – making a case for stronger policies. At the event, UN Women and the International Centre for Research on Women also released new research that shows that reservation works as the mere presence of women in these public spaces can transform patriarchal attitudes. Conducted amongst 3000 men and women from gram panchayats in three states — Rajasthan, Odisha and Karnataka — the study also finds that women leaders need strong support once they are elected. “Women cannot solely carry the burden of transforming the governing process. Additional action is needed at the policy and individual level. This is why it is encouraging to see in India that the women’s reservation bill is underway,” said Ms. Bachelet.

The programme covers Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh, effectively supporting nearly half a million women to participate in gram sabhas (village assemblies) meetings and voice their concerns to district officials on health, livelihoods, and water & sanitation. With UN Women’s efforts, more women are attending gram sabha meetings and have increased knowledge about their duties as elected leaders.

**Related article:**
Opening Speech of UN Women Executive Director Michelle Bachelet at the National Leadership Summit in Jaipur, India
Increasing women’s economic role is important for India, says UN Women Executive Director Michelle Bachelet

New Delhi, 3 October 2012: “We know that increasing women’s economic role is important for India and it’s good for women and good for business,” said Michelle Bachelet, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women at an interaction with leaders from Business, Science and Civil Society jointly organized by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and UN Women.

Ms Bachelet congratulated CII for being a key actor in India’s rapidly growing economy and said that the world would continue to look to India to take the lead in achieving the goals of economic growth and sustainable development. She said that “it was about engaging the productive capacity, creativity and talent of half the population and maximizing their role and rights as formal sector workers in agriculture, manufacturing and service sectors as well as increasing their purchasing power as consumers”.

Ms Bachelet emphasized that the most important partnership the UN has with the private sector is the UN Global Compact Women’s Empowerment Principles. These are a set of seven principles offering practical guidance on concrete actions that businesses can take to empower women. Globally, 400 CEOs have publicly declared their commitment to these principles.

Smt Praneet Kaur, Minister of State, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, thanked CII for this important initiative and said that she deeply appreciated its leadership in promoting women’s empowerment in the private sector.

Pointing out that India was not just the largest, but also the one of the most representative democracies in the world, the Minister elaborated on important Government initiatives such as reservation of seats for women at the Panchayat level which has lead to the development of a vibrant grass roots democracy at the village level, and is an important step in enabling women to have political power. She also said that there was a
focus on gender-specific schemes in the five-year plans. Gender-budgeting laws were going to be integral to the development agenda.

Tracing CII’s journey from a focus on competitiveness and profitability to encompass a more broad-based agenda that included CSR, Affirmative Action, Health and Education, Backward Region Development, Skills Training to help create a new paradigm of equitable, sustainable growth, Mr Subodh Bhargava, Past President, CII and Chairperson, Tata Communications Ltd., shared CII initiatives to both empower women at the workplace, and also marginalized women at the community level in rural and underprivileged urban areas. In this context, he mentioned that CII would be privileged to join hands with UN women to take the critically important agenda of women’s empowerment forward.

There was lively participation from Government representatives, thought leaders, civil society organizations, representatives from academia, the scientific community and leading corporates at the meet. Recent studies regarding the “Broken pipeline”, Government statistics, and anecdotal evidence, all pointed to women being very poorly represented in the organized sector, and almost negligible at senior levels. Various strategies to resolve these problems, worldwide, and in specific organizations were mentioned.

There was a consensus that these issues needed to be addressed with urgency so that women, who comprised 50 per cent of the population could live a life of equality and empowerment

Related article:
Remarks of UN Women Executive Director Michelle Bachelet at luncheon meeting with leaders from business, science and civil society, New Delhi, India
UN Women Executive Director calls for speedy implementation of progressive laws on women’s rights in India

New Delhi, 3 October 2012: On the first day of her first official visit to India as Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women, Michelle Bachelet, drew attention to efforts to advance gender equality and women’s empowerment, including at the grassroots level.

Commending India on the progressive legislation and initiatives that have been put in place in the largest democracy in the world, including the Sexual Harassment Bill, the Domestic Violence Act, and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act that guarantees equal pay for equal work for women, Ms. Bachelet called for robust actions to ensure implementation of these progressive laws, so that women at all economic levels can benefit from them.

“Unlocking women’s potential and increasing their political and economic participation and leadership is critical from the district offices to the corporate boardroom, from the Lok Sabha to the village panchayats. This will send a clear message to the world that India is leading the way for democracy, for women and for equality,” she said. In India, local level reservation has spurred women’s political engagement from the ground up. Today more than 40 per cent of seats on local councils are occupied by women. More than an estimated 1.5 million women have been elected into these panchayats, administering public services and resolving disputes from violence against women and girls to property issues. Ms. Bachelet called on India to complement the...
successful results obtained at the local level and to bring into conclusion the legislation for one-third reservation for women in Parliament.

Through discussions with senior-most officials and leaders in India, private sector and civil society, as well as meeting with elected women representatives and grassroots women in a gram sabha, attention will also be on women’s access to economic opportunities and resources. In India women’s participation in workforce is only 22 percent, and though 79 percent of rural women work in agriculture, more than 90 percent of them are in the informal sector, with little social protection and land ownership.

One the first day, Ms. Bachelet provided the keynote address at a global Inter-Parliamentary Union Conference on Women Speakers of Parliament on 3rd October in New Delhi and met with private-sector leaders at a high-level event hosted by the Confederation of Indian Industry.

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Keynote address of Michelle Bachelet at Inter-Parliamentary Union Conference of Women Speakers of Parliament in India ➤