

Statement by Mr. Ananth Kumar, Member of Parliament & Chairman,
Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs and Member of the
Indian delegation on Agenda Item 28 - 'Advancement of Women' during the
General Debate in the Third Committee, 67th Session of the United Nations
General Assembly on October 16, 2012

Mr. Chairman,

Thank you for giving me the floor. I would like to express my appreciation for the Report of the Secretary-General in highlighting key issues regarding the advancement of women, and to the speakers for their contribution to this discussion.



Mr. Chairman,

From times immemorial, India has believed that societies and nations, where women enjoy equality, dignity and empowerment, are placed better to achieve well-being of its people and indeed for global peace and harmony. This sentiment is aptly captured in the ancient Indian scripture - *Yatra-nariyastu pujiyante ramante tatra devta* - *where women are honoured, divinity blossoms there.*

Women constitute half the population and they, therefore, have a pivotal role in the economic, social and political progress of the country. The advancement of gender equality and empowerment of women has been central to India's political and socio-economic development agenda since our independence.

This principle found expression in our decision to grant full and equal voting rights to women six decades ago in 1950. The principle of gender equality is firmly enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The Constitution mandates that the State adopts special measures for women and children [Article 15(3)].

Our Constitution further recognizes the responsibility of the State to ensure "just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief" [Article 42]; "renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women" [Article 51(a)]; and refers to the provision of equal pay for equal work for both men and women in Article 39(d).

Mr. Chairman,

As the world's largest democracy, India has set to herself very clear and visionary goals and objectives such as:

- (i) Creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for full development of women to enable them to realize their full potential
- (ii) The *de-jure* and *de-facto* enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all spheres - political, economic, social, cultural and civil
- (iii) Equal access to participation and decision making of women in social, political and economic life of the nation
- (iv) Equal access for women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public office etc.
- (v) Strengthening legal systems aimed at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women
- (vi) Changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women.
- (vii) Mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process.
- (viii) Elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child; and
- (ix) Building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women's organizations.

Mr. Chairman,

We firmly believe that women need to be empowered both politically and economically to fully realize their potential in contributing to our national pursuit of inclusive development.

India proffered 33% reservation for women in rural and urban local governance bodies in 1992 through the 73rd Amendment Act of the Constitution to politically empower women and increase their participation in decision-making.

The Parliament subsequently raised the percentage of women representation to 50% in 2009. More than a million elected women are presently represented in local bodies constituting one of the biggest political mobilizations of women in the world.

Mr. Chairman,

The National Policy for Empowerment of Women was unveiled in 2001 and the National Mission for Empowerment of Women was subsequently launched to facilitate coordination and convergence of development programmes for women across several ministries. The National Resource Center for Women provides a central repository of knowledge, research and data on gender issues.

Mr. Chairman,

India's Eleventh Five Year Plan included significant targeted measures for gender equality and empowerment, with gender being a cross-cutting theme in all development plans. The inclusion and mainstreaming of women received special attention under education, health and skill development programmes.

There is a Joint Parliamentary Committee on Empowerment of Women which ensures that legislations passed by Parliament are gender-sensitive. Since 2005, the Gender Budget Statement has been introduced in the annual Union Budget to reflect budgetary allocations for programmes that benefit women.

Our targeted measures and interventions have brought about visible socio-economic progress for women. Maternal and infant mortality rates have reduced significantly; gender gaps in wage rates have diminished; there is almost full enrolment in primary grades of schooling and narrowing of gender gaps in middle and higher education.

Mr. Chairman,

At least 50% of the work is reserved for women in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, which responds to the needs of 53 million poor rural households by ensuring them 100 days employment per year. The scheme mandates equal pay for men and women.

Many Indian provinces have successfully implemented and have created success stories through targeted programmes such as '*Kanya khelwani*' - education programme for girl child in Gujarat; '*Bhagya Lakshmi*' and '*Ladli Lakshmi*' - social and economic security schemes in Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh; '*Janani Suraksha Yojna*' and '*Madilu*' in Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh and '*Janani Shishu Suraksha Yojna*' in Rajasthan to provide health care, nutrition and post-natal care to reduce IMR and MMR; '*Indira Kranthi Patham*' in Andhra Pradesh for strengthening of Self-help Groups with focus on women empowerment and poverty alleviation and schemes such as free distribution of bicycles for school-going girl children in Bihar, MP and Karnataka.

Mr. Chairman,

Recognizing that rural women can leverage their strength, increase bargaining power and enhance capacities and skills through joint action, the Government has encouraged organization of Self-Help Groups (SHG) - a movement that started as peoples' initiative, and to channelize resources to these groups.

There are around 6 million SHGs of which 80% (4.8 million) are women's groups, covering 97.4 million beneficiaries. Women's Self-Help Groups are, thus, a very important vehicle for economic empowerment.

We are implementing special measures and programmes for disadvantaged groups such as women in extreme poverty, women affected by natural calamities, women in less developed regions, the disabled, widows, elderly women, single women, women heading households, migrants, etc.

Mr. Chairman,

India enacted a comprehensive Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act which recognises that violence can take various forms, including physical, economic, social and psychological.

This Act provides a legal tool for women to fight violence within the family - both marital and familial abuse. The law seeks to provide support to women victim of domestic violence in form of shelter, medical help, compensation, maintenance orders, and temporary custody of children.

There is a comprehensive legislative and policy framework to address the problem of trafficking of women and girls. A draft Bill aimed at providing a safe and secure environment for women at the work place is presently before the Parliament of India.

Media should portray messages and images consistent with human dignity of girls and women and desist from demeaning, degrading and negative conventional stereotypical images of women and on violence against women. The media is being encouraged to evolve self-regulatory mechanisms in this regard.

Mr. Chairman,

Ensuring gender equality and women's empowerment is essential to the pursuit of building inclusive societies. It is also an imperative for building strong and resilient economies.

India reaffirms her international obligations/commitments as set out in the Convention on All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD+5) and other such instruments.

International, regional and sub-regional cooperation towards the empowerment of women will continue to be encouraged through sharing of experiences, exchange of ideas and technology, networking with institutions and organizations and through bilateral and multi-lateral partnerships.

We reiterate our full commitment to advancing this goal globally and firmly support the efforts of the United Nations, in particular UN Women, which has recorded significant achievements in only two years since its establishment.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

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