

**SPEECH OF THE HON'BLE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE ON THE OCCASION OF THE SEVENTH MEETING OF WOMEN SPEAKERS OF PARLIAMENT ON GENDER-SENSITIVE PARLIAMENTS**

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Shri Mohammed Hamid Ansari, Vice President & Chairman, Rajya Sabha,  
Smt. Meira Kumar, Speaker, Lok Sabha,  
Mr. Abdelwahed Radi, President of the Inter- Parliamentary Union,  
Distinguished Speakers and Deputy Speakers participating in this  
Conference,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to join you in inaugurating the 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Women Speakers of Parliament on Gender Sensitive Parliaments. It is particularly opportune that this 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting is being held in India.

Distinguished Delegates,

1. More than 65 years ago, Indian women stood shoulder to shoulder with freedom fighters to fight for self-governance and demand that Indians should participate in making the laws that applied to them. Once we achieved independence, an important goal was to achieve the empowerment of women. The principle of gender equality is enshrined in

the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women.

2. Within the framework of a democratic polity, our laws, development policies, plans and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres.

3. From the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-78) onwards there has been a marked shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development and in recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women.

4. Our law makers realized that as long as the women of India did not participate in the making of policy and in self-governance, their social status would not improve. But although attempts were made more than two decades ago, it was only in 2010 that the Upper House of the Parliament of India took the historic step of passing a bill to reserve a third of all legislative seats across the country for women. The bill was passed by 186 votes to 1. It was a momentous occasion.

5. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of Panchayats

and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels. One-third of the seats in local bodies are now reserved for women. With this step, 800,000 women were brought into the political process in a single election. This is very significant as the gram panchayat, is in my view, the best training ground for future parliamentarians.

6. At present women constitute 11 percent of the 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha. This is a vast improvement from only 5 percent in the 1st Lok Sabha. But although the percentage of Indian women parliamentarians has increased over the years, it is still lower in comparison to countries like Sweden, Argentina, the UK and the USA. I am sure that it is a matter of time before the number will be increased significantly. Of course, we should remain cognizant of the fact that gender equality and sensitivity is not guaranteed simply by the presence and number of women in parliament. It depends on a parliament's level of recognition of the importance of gender sensitivity, its responsive policies and infrastructure.

7. Distinguished delegates, it is obvious that a gender sensitive parliament will have a greater success in achieving gender equality and prioritising subjects important to women. They would have a better understanding of the issues related to water, fuel, food and income and

deal with them with the urgency they deserve. A gender sensitive parliament can address, more insightfully, the social problems that women face – which are a blot on society – such as violence against women, female foeticide, trafficking of women and minor girls, their abuse and exploitation and the lack of medical and nutritional care of rural women to name a few. Similarly, it can safeguard more effectively women’s rights to land, leadership, opportunities and choices.

8. Sustainable economic and social development can best be spearheaded by well-designed initiatives involving women leaders. With access to and control over productive resources such as food banks and cooperatives, and programmes related to health campaigns and nutrition awareness, women now have the wherewithal to take collective decisions on the way these should best be implemented in their area or jurisdiction . By increasing rural women’s leadership and participation in decisions that shape the laws, policies and programmes that affect them, we can enable them to take charge of their own futures.

9. Government of India, through its Finance Ministry, has introduced Gender Budgeting to ensure that in all financial outlays there is a specific element or component that is meant for the benefit of women in India. This has been successfully implemented across the sectors and every line

Ministry is required to report on their execution of the gender budgeting stipulations. This needs to be taken further.

10. Distinguished Delegates, I fully agree that making parliaments more gender sensitive should be one of the primary preoccupations of Parliaments across the globe. Poet Laureate Rabindranath Tagore had said. *“Woman is the builder and moulder of a nation's destiny..... she has a heart, far stronger and bolder than of man.... She is the supreme inspiration for man's onward march ....”* The Parliament of India has been graced by many brilliant women representatives who have enhanced the quality and content of discussions.

11. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to them and thank them for their contribution to the shaping of the India of today, and their legacy. Women have a unique perspective of problems and a great aptitude for innovative solutions. And that is why I anticipate that this conference will undoubtedly generate a significant amount of positive energy and many far reaching initiatives. This will be an occasion to exchange information and best practices.

12. Distinguished Delegates, I congratulate you on your leadership and commitment to creating a more gender sensitive parliamentary

environment. I look forward to the outcome of your work in this conference. I congratulate Smt Meira Kumar, Speaker of the Lok Sabha for her initiative to host this conference in India. While I may not have the opportunity to meet each one of you, I wish you great success in your work over the next two days and assure you of my unstinting support.

Jai Hind!