Ladies & Gentlemen:

Promoting women’s participation in politics is one of the core areas of women empowerment. Active participation of women in the mainstream political activities, political processes, decision-making and policy formulation certainly has a strong bearing on the governance structure, nation-building and development of a country. The presence of women in the decision-making levels not only enhances their social, political and economic status, but also strengthens democratic institutions by making them more inclusive and meaningful.

As you all are aware, political participation is not only about the right to vote, but also about power-sharing, decision-making and policy formulation at all levels of governance. Democracy at the grassroots level provides an opportunity to women to participate and flourish within a small unit, realize a sense of democratic responsibility and get instilled with the values of democracy and good governance.

In India, the principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Constitution. Our Constitution guarantees to all women the fundamental right to equality under which they get equal voting rights and equal right to political participation. Our Constitution is firmly grounded in the principles of liberty,
fraternity, equality and justice, and accordingly contains a number of provisions for the empowerment of women. The political rights of women in India are thus recognized without any discrimination or distinction and, as such, they have the right to participate in decision-making process at all levels equally with men.

India, in fact, was a pioneer in extending adult franchise to its women population in the very first General Elections held after Independence. The right to constitutional equality has been supplemented by legal equality with the enactment of a number of legislations through which the traditional inequalities in respect of marriage, divorce and property rights are sought to be eliminated. However, there is still a need for an increased representation of women in the political and legislative bodies so as to enable them to have a more effective role and say in decision-making processes. Though the evolution of Indian democracy through the 15 General Elections held so far reflects an overall improvement in the working of our polity and governance structure, there is still a low representation of women in Parliament, State Legislatures, political parties and various decision-making bodies.

As far as women’s participation in local governance is concerned, their representation in the local elected bodies in India reveals the story of a mature and flourishing democracy that has evolved over the years. Though the origin of the local self-government in India goes back to the ancient times, the 73rd and 74th Amendments to our Constitution effected in 1993 have given a new
dimension to local self-governing institutions in our country by providing for representation of women in at least one-third of their total membership.

We, in India, have the local self-governance bodies in both the rural and the urban areas. In rural areas, they are called *Panchayati Raj* Institutions and in the urban areas they exist in the form of Municipalities. At present, these local self-governing institutions - both rural and urban - derive their powers and functions directly from the Constitution. We have two separate Parts in our Constitution specifically delineating the structures, compositions, functioning and tenure of both the rural and the urban local bodies. Further, our Constitution distinctively allocates the subjects on which the local bodies have the authority to develop, maintain and regulate.

The local level representative bodies in India have given the much-needed political platform and space to women, thereby enabling them to take part in planning and development at the grassroots level. By positively impacting the representation of women, these grassroots level democratic institutions have laid a strong foundation for women’s participation in decision-making processes in India. Through this affirmative action, a silent revolution has taken place wherein more than a million women have entered politics across the country. Today, we have around 37 per cent representation of women in our local bodies which is higher than the mandated 33 per cent. To give more representation to women in local bodies, some of the States in India have enacted legislations providing for half of the seats for women in local bodies.
At the national level, at present, we have three Constitutional Amendment Bills under consideration in our Parliament. While one seeks to provide for at least one-third seats for women in the national and state legislatures, the other two Bills seek to mandatorily provide for half of the seats for women in all the local level representative bodies. Over the years, it has been observed that the overall performance of women elected representatives at the local level has been better than that of their male counterparts which is encouraging for them to assume higher responsibilities in later years. Despite these efforts and significant changes over the years, social constraints appear to be serious obstacles in giving the dues to the women folk in our society.

Challenges to increased participation of women in politics in India, particularly at the local levels are manifold. In fact, effectiveness of women’s political presence and participation depends not solely on their competence, capability and merit, but also on the local configuration of power and problems like poverty, illiteracy, health, lack of economic resources, negative social and legal environments, family and household pressures and various other socio-economic factors. The scope for women’s public activism varies across class, caste and region in India. The cumulative effect of all these has been that women still tend to lack the required opportunities, skills and self-confidence needed to function effectively in the public sphere.

Predominant socio-religious and cultural practices and restricted professional advancement further add to women’s predicament. Apart from
these, there are some overarching challenges to women’s participation in politics. The single largest and the most pervasive challenge lies in the form of deeply-entrenched negative stereotyping of women’s role and position in society. Gender disparities are more due to the lack of proper understanding of capabilities of women than any real frailty of will and wisdom among them. It is, therefore, essential to tackle these notions and to understand how they subvert gender equality.

Recognizing the need for making the position of women better and stronger, several measures have been taken by our successive Governments in recent years to empower women socially, economically and politically. Political empowerment of women has now been attached utmost priority and their participation in other spheres such as governmental bodies, public administration, Judiciary and corporate and technical bodies has been recognized as equally important. As the pioneer of championing the cause of the women, our Parliament enacted the National Commission for Women Act, 1990 paving way for the establishment of the National Commission for Women in 1992 to safeguard the interests of women in our society. Our Joint Parliamentary Committee on Empowerment of Women is yet another parliamentary initiative aimed at monitoring, examining and reporting on the varied aspects of gender-related issues.

To further advance and empower women in India, we have also adopted a National Policy for Empowerment of Women in 2001 not only to eliminate all
forms of discrimination against women, but also to ensure that women in our society are encouraged and promoted to actively participate in all spheres of life and activities. These apart, we also have gender-budgeting in our country to mainstream gender concerns in public expenditure and policy-making. In recent years, allocations for women-related programmes and schemes in the budget have been increased substantially.

Women’s rights and responsibilities to participate equally in political life cannot be treated as a ‘minority’ issue. The political space must belong to all citizens - women and men. The value of inclusion of women in governance and decision-making institutions lies in the diversity of experiences women will bring to governance. While it is considered important to bring women to positions of power, it is equally necessary to make the people in power, whether men or women, adequately gender-sensitive. Equally important is women’s economic independence, their educational advancement and their socio-economic improvement. Gender equality is a goal which cannot be achieved only by higher representation of women in the Legislatures and other public bodies but it has to be buttressed by other supportive measures. The restructuring of gender relations both within the family and in the society is an important step not only towards promoting freedom, equality and justice in favour of women but also for ensuring their increased political participation at all levels.

Thank you.