

Michelle Bachelet

Former President of Chile (2006-2010)



Ms. Michelle Bachelet is the first Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women). Ms. Bachelet most recently served as President of Chile from 2006 to 2010. She became the first woman to be elected President in the history of the Republic of Chile. A long-time champion of women's rights, she has advocated for gender equality and women's empowerment throughout her career.

The Cornell community packed Statler Auditorium on September 4 to hear Michelle Bachelet, Under-Secretary-General of the UN and Executive Director of UN Women and former President of Chile, give the Henry E. and Nancy Horton Bartels 2012 World Affairs Fellowship Lecture. In her talk, entitled "Women and the new development paradigm" Bachelet spoke about two major goals of UN Women; building the economic power of women all over the world and putting more women in leadership positions.

The pursuit of these two goals, Bachelet argued, would lead to greater equality for women and greater overall prosperity. "We cannot achieve the fundamental goals of our time without tapping into the potential of all humanity," she said. "The historic and persistent subjugation of women is not sustainable. We must develop and nurture all of humankind's potential."

After telling the audience how honored she was to speak at an institution that had been a pioneer in providing equal opportunities to women, Bachelet addressed her first theme of "unleashing women's full economic potential." She cited the statistic that in the developing world 43 percent of the agricultural labor force are women, but that they own only 2 percent of the land. Women are also disproportionately impacted by crises such as climate change and war and don't have equal access to energy, credit, or technology. Without access to clean energy and clean water, she continued, women are in hazardous conditions that reduce their life expectancy and are unable to contribute as much to their economies as they potentially could. Closing the income gap between men and women would boost both GDP and employment rates in developing countries. "When women enjoy equal rights and privileges, they can make a huge contribution to sustainable development," she said.

Bachelet also identified disparity in pay as a huge barrier, highlighting the statistic that women earn on average 17 percent less than their male counterparts for doing the same work. Bachelet said this was not caused by a "glass ceiling", but a "leaky pipeline" that prevents women from getting the education

and mentorship they need to advance their careers and economic lives. Increasing the training opportunities available to women and to providing flexible, pro-family working relationships and childcare is crucial to combating this trend. "Education is a driving force for equality," she said, citing studies that have shown that a mother's education level determines the economic success of her children of both genders.

The second theme addressed by Bachelet was the need to put more women in leadership positions. Making effective policy with the best interests of everyone in mind requires the civic engagement of women. "The right of women to decide if, when, and how many children she should have depends on having women in decision making positions," said Bachelet. She pointed out that the inclusion of women in politics has led to ground-breaking results in former crisis states such as South Africa, Rwanda, Nepal and Tunisia. The key factor, she said, is enacting a general parity law that guarantees the inclusion of women on ballots and throughout the electoral process. Bachelet also emphasized the importance of the role model effect in combatting the "leaky pipeline" of political advancement.

Bachelet concluded with a sobering statistic; that 1 in 3 women worldwide will experience some form of gender-based violence. By pursuing the twin priorities of building the economic power of women and putting more of them in more leadership positions, she stressed that we wouldn't only do better for women, but could help all of humanity by tapping into a vital and underused global resource that can contribute to our development goals.

After concluding her prepared remarks, Bachelet responded to several questions from the floor. Visiting fellow Nimat Barazangi asked how to strike the difficult balance between democratic participation in Iraq, Afghanistan and the countries of the "Arab Spring" and the religious fundamentalism that is gaining in political influence. Bachelet said that this was hard to answer because there was no recipe for success. "Democracy is always better than dictatorship, but it is not a result but a process," she said.

Tim Shenk, coordinator of the Committee on U.S.-Latin American Relations (CUSLAR), asked how the "new development paradigm" addressed by Bachelet represented a departure from the neo-liberal economic system that had not served the best interests of developing economies. She answered that a paradigm is not a solution, but a goal. "We know the principles of what we want to achieve, but we need to work much more on the paradigm," she summarized.

Another member of the audience asked if the gender equality reforms in Chile would work throughout Latin America. Bachelet responded that every country has its own needs, but that pursuing the twin priorities of building the economic power of women and putting more of them in leadership positions would help to meet all of these differing individual needs.

Michelle Bachelet is the first Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), which was established on 2 July 2010 by the United Nations General Assembly and became operational by 1 January 2011. UN Women works with the entire UN system, governments, civil society and the private sector to advance women's empowerment and gender equality worldwide.

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One of her major successes as President was her decision to save billions of dollars in revenues to spend on issues such as pension reform, social protection programs for women and children, and research and development, despite the financial crisis. Other initiatives included tripling the number of free early

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child-care centers for low-income families and the completion of some 3,500 child-care centers around the country.

She also held ministerial portfolios in the Chilean Government as Minister of Defense and Minister of Health. As Defense Minister, Bachelet introduced gender policies intended to improve the conditions of women in the military and police forces. As Minister of Health, she implemented health care reform, improving attention to primary care facilities with the aim of ensuring better and faster health care response for families.

The Henry E. and Nancy Horton Bartels World Affairs Fellowship was established in 1984, to bring prominent international leaders to Cornell. The mission of the fellowship program is explicitly educational-to foster a broadened worldview among Cornell students by bringing to campus persons who have distinguished themselves as international public figures.

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