

**Side Event
by the UN Democracy Fund
On the sidelines of
63rd Commission on Status of Women**

**Remarks by
Amb. Nagaraj Naidu,
Deputy Permanent Representative Permanent Mission of India to the
United Nations**

Empowerment, Engagement and Leadership Through Civil Society

**CR – A, UNHQ
21 March 2019 at 1645Hrs**

Ms. Annika Savill, Executive Head, UNDEF

Ms. Courtney Nemroff, Acting U.S. Representative to the ECOSOC:

Dr. Wairimu Njoya, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Williams College:

Distinguished members of the civil society,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I am happy to be here today with you in this very important event which provides us the opportunity to discuss our partnership with UN Democracy Fund, and also to learn from the civil society groups about their work done in partnership with the UN Democracy Fund on women empowerment and how all of this feed into supporting democracy.
2. A fair and independent electoral process, an independent judiciary, a Parliament with a vibrant opposition, a boisterous media, and thriving civil society have defined India since it adopted its Constitution in 1950.
3. Talking about elections, 2,300 political parties will soon be vying for votes from the 900 million electorate at the national elections which kick off on 11 April. India's eligible voting population is almost three times entire population of the United States. However, the good thing is that we use over 2 million electronic voting machines, which helps

us in saving close to 10,000 tons of paper or cutting down over 1.2 million fully grown trees.

4. While democracies are not perfect, they are not imperfect either. It is this co-existence of the perfect and imperfect that make democracies relatable and, in some sense, glorious. Democracy is central to the idea of India. Managing the ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural diversity and complexity of disorder in India is only possible through a democratic system, where everyone – woman or man, has a say.
5. The role of free and active civil society is central to sustaining the vibrancy of democracy. India has roughly 3.5 million NGOs. These NGOs represent those without a voice; mobilize citizens into movements; build support across stakeholders; and bring credibility to the political system by promoting transparency and accountability.
6. India is a founding partner of the UN Democracy Fund. During the last decade, we have contributed a modest \$32 million to the Fund, and remain its second largest contributor. This is essentially out of our deep faith in democracy and belief in the supportive role that civil society could play. We have closely followed the work of UNDEF in supporting projects that strengthen the voice of civil society, promoting human rights and encouraging participation of all groups in democratic processes.
7. India has a rich and vibrant civil society and a strong tradition of women's participation. Democracy requires an informed citizenry and transparency of information which are vital to its functioning and also to contain corruption and to hold Governments and their instrumentalities accountable to the governed.
8. Following years of advocacy by civil society, the Indian government enacted the Right to Information Act in 2005. This piece of legislation helps any individual or civil society organization in India demand transparency, accountability and action. As such, it even contributes to efforts to enforce effective implementation of other laws and policies.
9. Talking of information, UNDEF has funded an award-winning rural weekly newspaper published in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in local languages and run by a collective of 40 rural women journalists. The

newspaper is a shining example that a functioning democracy is dependent on access to information for all people. The newspaper helps local populations access their rights and resources by reporting about these issues and by selecting its reporters from among the locals. This way it also plays the role of a watchdog.

10. Since the launch of Clean India Mission, the number of people practicing open defecation in India has gone down from 550 million in 2014, to less than 150 million today placing India on track to achieve open defecation free (ODF) status by end of 2019, as reflected in SDG 6.2, more than a whole decade ahead of target year of 2030.
11. This could not have been possible without the support of the nearly five-hundred thousand community “motivators”, mostly women from the civil society organizations, who have encouraged people to use the nearly 90 million household toilets that have been built in rural areas in the last five years. Women’s leadership and agency has played a critical role in this context. Women have also been trained to design and build toilet systems which has led to creation of jobs.
12. India has moved from women development to women-led development. The import of this approach can only be understood in the context of the fact that India’s women population is more than 640 million, and more than 400 million of them live in rural areas, this is nearly 62% of the total women population in India. Let’s look at the participation of women in rural politics.
13. Following the landmark 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution (1992), reserving 33% of the seats for women in all grassroots level – village, block and district level institutions, today India has 1.4 million elected women representatives. Women constitute around 44% of the total grassroots elected representatives. 43% of the elected heads of villages in India are women.
14. The process of decentralization has provided representation but representation does not necessarily lead to participation. Women still face a number of challenges for their engagement in political spaces such as inadequate education, lack of financial independence, burden of productive and reproductive roles and opposition stemming from entrenched patriarchal views.

15. Government of India has initiated a Capacity Building Programme for Elected Women Representatives at the grassroots level with an objective of empowering them by developing leadership capacities so that they serve as catalysts for social change and function as peer facilitators in the field, become vocal for their rights and participate effectively in the governance processes. In Phase-I of the programme (2017-18), a total 18,578 Elected Women Representatives in 14 States were trained. In Phase-II, 18 we propose to train 15,030 elected women representatives in 18 states.
16. In 2011, UNDEF funded a project in the state of Rajasthan. As a result of the project, the participation of elected women in village council meetings has increased, as have joint initiatives on issues such as health, water, sanitation, education, violence, accountability and corruption.
17. At the national level, while women have occupied important positions of power, they continue to remain underrepresented in the national parliament. In the last general election, women made up just 12% of the elected representatives.
18. While the discourse on women's empowerment is progressing from viewing women as recipients of welfare benefits to mainstreaming their concerns and creating space for them to assume leadership roles, challenges remain. In such situations, the role of civil society becomes critical in socializing innovative solutions on method, means, and substance. We hope to learn today several such stories from across the world.