

Second Annual International Women's Day Celebration Breakfast
"Global Dispatches: Women Moving Forward - and to the Top"
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Global Dispatch: Reflection on Michelle Bachelet, President of Chile
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Good morning to everyone.

Michelle Bachelet was born in Chile in the city of Santiago. She is the second child of archeologist Ángela Jeria and Air Force General Alberto Bachelet. She spent many of her childhood years moving around due to her father's military obligations; two of those years were here in the United States. In 1970, she enrolled into Medical School at the University of Chile.

In 1973, her father was serving under the democratically elected President Salvador Allende, when General Augusto Pinochet came to power through a military coup backed by the United States. What followed was a 17-year dictatorship, marked by widespread human-rights violations that would fundamentally shape Chilean history and Ms. Bachelet's personal and political life.

Her father was detained and tortured to death by his fellow officers. He was one of about 3000 people who died or disappeared during Pinochet's regime. She and her mother were also arrested and tortured for about three weeks, exiled to Australia and then to East Germany, where she got married, had her first child and continued her medical studies.

When referring to this part of her life, she said:

"Violence entered my life, destroying what I loved. Because I was a victim of hate, I have dedicated my life to turn that hate into understanding, into tolerance and, why not say it, into love."

In 1979 Ms. Bachelet returned to Chile, resumed her studies and later graduated with highest honors as a Medical Doctor in 1983. She specialized in pediatrics and public health. During the following years, she started to work in her field, got actively involved in politics and, on top of that, became a mother for a second time.

In 1990, after an enormous and peaceful struggle, Chile regained its Democracy, since then, the center-left coalition, known as the Concertacion, has governed the country. During this time, she had her third child and, yet continued to work in public health in different governmental institutions, including being the adviser of the Ministry of Health. However, encouraged by the desire to bring together the civil and military people, she started to study a course of military strategies at the National Academy of Political and Strategic Studies, and also she studied at the Inter-American Defense College in Washington DC. in 1997.

When Ricardo Lagos won the presidency in January 2000, he appointed her to be Health Minister. Once in charge, she successfully achieved her main goal of restoring confidence in a national health care system.

Later, President Lagos appointed her to be Defense Minister, becoming the first woman in Latin America – and one of the very few in the world – to hold this portfolio.

As defense minister, Ms. Bachelet humored the military commanders by saying:

“I am a woman, a socialist, single mother, and agnostic, “all the sins together.”

In 2004, she started her presidential campaign. Many tried to criticize and diminish her ability to be a President. In the end, nobody could revert the fact that being a mother, an excellent professional, a multilingual that speaks five different languages, an experienced politician with a great vocation for public service clearly show that she is more than capable to be a great President.

During her campaign she said:

"I am a mother of three. Right now, I don't have a partner. This was not a problem when I was a minister and it should not be an issue as president.”

She is also an agnostic, however, she has said: Religion is too sacred to be used for political reasons. Religion is to unite people, not to divide them. Religion is to spread values not fear.

In December 2005 four candidates ran for the presidential elections. Unfortunately, Ms. Bachelet did not obtain the required majority of the votes, which is 51%. She, therefore, went into the run-off ballot; leading the opinion polls.

She said:

"I would have liked to have won in the first round. However, I take this as a reason to work harder, because after all, women are used to work twice as hard all the time," And she did, she won with a high turnout of 53.5 percent of the votes becoming the first Chilean woman President.

Ms Bachelet promised continuity, as head of the coalition, but she also pledged change. She started by creating an equal opportunity government. She has made her cabinet up of an equal number of women and men.

She also committed herself by saying "We have to make sure that everybody in this country will have the benefits of our economic growth, so we can bridge the gap between rich and poor and to give a greater voice to women and indigenous people. I will work hard to avoid all kinds of discrimination, even for sexual orientation.”

Finally, in her victory speech she said:

“The mere fact that I am here tonight symbolizes the change that we have experienced. We have left our fears and biases behind. Today, we have confronted prejudice with reasoning. We have built a freer society. The world has looked at this election with

amazement, but this is not the first time that Chileans have amazed the world and will not be the last.”

“I will work tirelessly for our nation. There is no time to lose. Because of what is in play is the smile of our children, the peacefulness of our mothers, the well being of the workers and the happiness of our people.”

And what she said is true, “there is no time to lose”, because when we are seeing so much poverty, and hatred around us, when we are seeing mothers without any food to give to their children, and thousands of women being sexually abused or discriminated, we, women, must be united and work together to achieve the goal of making our world a peaceful and better place to live in.

Thank you.