

Opening remarks by Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), at the Special Session on Beijing+20 in Latin America and the Caribbean

Santiago, 18 November 2014

Excellency, Michelle Bachelet, President of the Republic of Chile,

Representatives of the member States of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean,

Ministers and high-level authorities of the governments of our region represented here today,

Members of the diplomatic corps,

Gülden Turkoz-Cosslett, Officer-in-Charge of the Policy and Programme Bureau of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women),

Antonio Molpeceres, Resident Representative of the United Nations in Chile,

Colleagues from the Division for Gender Affairs of ECLAC,

Representatives of feminist organizations and civil society,

Friends,

Allow me to welcome you all to ECLAC, the home of the United Nations in our region.

Two decades have passed since the efforts of women around the world led to the adoption of the Platform for Action as a road map for achieving equality. The Platform for Action, adopted by the governments represented at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women contain our region's international commitments with respect to gender equality.

Today we come together to assess the achievements of the Platform for Action at this special session, in the presence of our dear friend, President Michelle Bachelet, the first Executive Director of UN-Women and a fine example of a person committed to the worthy task of combating all inequalities. Thank you for honouring us with your presence at this Special Session on Beijing+20 in Latin America and the Caribbean, devoted to a subject that is so close to your heart and your convictions. Still ringing in our ears are the words you pronounced back in the early days following the creation of this new institution: "The challenges are clear and considerable. But being a historical optimist, I believe we have the ability to foster unimaginable transformations with respect to the development of our societies. We can be the protagonists of the most universally sought-after cultural revolution: equality between women and men. There is no doubt in my mind that this is our century, the century of women. "

From UN-Women, the institution you founded, we have here with us today Gülden Turkoz-Cosslett, Officer-in-Charge of the Policy and Programme Bureau, with whom we have prepared this special session. The agreements we reach at this session will be submitted to the Commission on the Status of Women at its fifty-ninth session, to be held in 2015.

As we can see from the reports submitted by the governments, gender policies are now clearly a part of countries' institutional frameworks. These entities, headed by visionary women, have created special forums devoted to discussing ways of updating and innovating the gender agenda on the basis of the outcomes of the regional conferences on women in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The regional report presented today by ECLAC has drawn on such contributions, insights, knowledge and experience. I want to applaud the efforts made to ensure these reports contain relevant statistical information. Such data are updated continuously by the Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean, established at the tenth session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, held in Quito in 2010. According to the regional report: "Girls who saw their mothers participate in the process leading up to the Fourth World Conference on Women are now women themselves, citizens who have inherited a set of rights imagined and dreamed by their grandmothers, as well as

owners of a diverse chorus of voices that are questioning, challenging and shedding new light on the challenges at hand. They are witnesses to the changes wrought by the collective action and leadership of a generation of women (and men) who put the issue of diversity on the international policy agenda.

Special mention is deserved by the representatives of the broader women's movement who are here today, including feminists, women from organizations representing indigenous and Afro-descendent populations and members of organizations in defence of sexual diversity, for the strength of their ideas, their organization and their ongoing struggle. And here I would like to extend a greeting to Virginia Vargas and all the proud daughters of the Flora Tristán Peruvian Women's Centre.

Today we call on governments and civil society to join forces, not to lower their guard and to prevent backsliding because, despite the significant progress that has been made, there is still a long way to go before equality is achieved.

The achievements to date include a new legal rights framework, essential for the advancement of women. There are changes with respect to the effective enjoyment of rights by women and girls. Public policies have made progress on violence, political participation and gender mainstreaming. I would like to highlight in particular the Platform for Action, which, two decades ago, contained a vision and a series of crystal clear policy proposals aimed at achieving equality. These, for various reasons, were not fully taken on board. To recall, the main objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action were to ensure equal pay, apply laws and practices to eliminate discrimination on grounds of sex, undertake reforms to give equal rights to access economic resources, review biases in tax policy and build knowledge to better measure and understand the extent and distribution of unpaid work, including through the development of methods to determine its value, and amend laws governing the operation of financial institutions so that they provide services to women under the same conditions as men. These are some of the measures agreed by the member countries to promote women's independence and economic rights, including access to employment, proper working conditions and control

over economic resources. Those governments pledged to enforce laws on equal pay and eliminate discriminatory practices in employment, especially those that penalize motherhood.

The Platform also contains recommendations on mitigating any adverse effects that trade agreements might have on women's new and traditional economic activities, and on the use of gender analysis in the formulation of macroeconomic, microeconomic and social policies, with a view to monitoring the gender impact of such policies so as to modify them in cases of harmful impacts and fighting poverty through employment policies and the expansion of access to assets.

We know that putting equality front and centre means breaking with the economic paradigm that has prevailed in the region for at least three decades. That is why it is necessary to carry out a fair assessment of what has happened over the last 20 years. We must consider both the international context and the dimensions of national policies in order to understand why the implementation of the agreements has been so slow and flawed.

When we met in Beijing, our region was just emerging from the "lost decade" of low growth, high inflation and balance-of-payments constraints related to external debt. Much of the region's post-Beijing history has been tainted by economic, political and social crisis resulting from the tumultuous 1980s, when several countries emerged from dictatorships and began to implement adjustment policies based on the insensitive tenets of neoliberalism.

Many of the new management models introduced to implement measures to address the 12 areas of concern of the Platform for Action have gone against the grain of the dominant paradigm. New institutions and various national and territorial mechanisms were created, the assumptions of orthodox economics were questioned and gender statistics were developed to highlight the critical dimensions of inequality, in particular through time-use surveys and surveys on violence against women. Furthermore, media content and language were revised, extending women's freedoms, but above all giving a truly universal meaning to the notion of equality.

On the political front, six women have been elected president or head of State in the recent past, and four of them have been re-elected. Overall, there has been a significant increase in women's participation in parliaments. These data reveal profound positive cultural changes as a different, more mature citizenry puts its trust in women leaders in areas that call for decision-making, including the armed forces of some countries, which have in recent years opened their doors to women.

On the whole, the situation of women in the region has improved slowly but steadily over the last 20 years, though we must also recognize that the results are very heterogeneous. On average, the region has brought down the proportion of women living in poverty. However, progress has been uneven, with differences between countries and within them.

In some countries, inequalities are especially marked in rural areas, with indigenous and Afro-descendent women being two groups that experience many different forms of discrimination, thus further exacerbating the characteristic structural inequalities of the region. This is seen, in particular, in the Andean and Central American countries. In countries, for example in the Southern Cone, whose poverty rates were below the regional average around 1995, the femininity index of poverty has risen, and to an even greater extent among the urban population

In most countries, women make up a significant proportion of the lowest income groups. In the region, one in three women does not have her own income, compared with one in ten men. In the last 20 years, the structure of the labour market has hardly changed and data on women's and men's time use show that the costs of labour participation have been shouldered wholly by women. The road to equality requires profound structural change and the transformation of power relationships between women and men.

Let us make no mistake. It is not about adding care work, an activity undertaken mainly by women, to the market space as a minor consideration; rather there is a need to acknowledge the existence of a complex structure comprising paid and unpaid work, both of which are absolutely essential to sustaining human life.

Hence structural change involves transforming the way we produce and consume, and redistributing time use, jobs and income among everyone, men and women, with a particular emphasis on the redistribution of care work. This redistribution will not be possible while care work remains unrecognized and is not ascribed social value. Similarly, mutual recognition between women and men is not possible while the activities they carry out, which are necessary for survival and quality of life, are not afforded equal recognition and value.

In addition, demographic changes have had an impact on the care economy, the costs of which are typically borne by women. In this connection, the Platform for Action did not include among its considerations the fact that economic growth and declining birth rates typically lead to a loss of productivity with respect to care. That is, in households with many children, one person can look after several others simultaneously and older children often share care tasks with parents, whereas in smaller nuclear households, the care of one or two children may not be easy to share or compatible with carrying out other care activities at the same time. The situation with regard to care for older persons is the same. The move towards smaller or single-person dwellings erodes the productivity savings that accrue from providing various services simultaneously, such as cleaning, passive care, food preparation or the benefits of shopping for several people.

With respect to technology, the Platform promotes women's access to all types of technology to facilitate access to employment and further training, but it does not address the new digital technologies that are driving new forms of social organization and production. In the light of changes in recent decades, this is a major emerging challenge and one to which new approaches have already been applied, for example in the Santo Domingo Consensus.

In addition to addressing economic, social, labour and productive development challenges, the region urgently needs to tackle the dual, cross-cutting challenge of ensuring that development is environmentally sustainable and building physical and economic resilience to the effects of environmental degradation and especially climate change. Climate change, just like the new technological paradigm, is covered by the Platform for Action, where it highlights that women have an essential role to play in the development of sustainable and ecologically

sound consumption and production patterns and approaches to natural resource management. Of the 12 areas for action that were agreed upon, this is the area with the fewest outcomes reported by governments.

Friends, the region is facing complex challenges at the current crossroads. The less favourable international context is having an impact on the region's economy and trade. The marked economic slowdown weakens the scope for active social and economic policies. However, we must ensure that we take a critical view of the analytical framework underpinning orthodox economics, which focuses on the market as the best allocator of resources and disregards the State's role as regulator and guarantor of rights. In this new scenario, despite the more complex economic situation, the pursuit of equality remains imperative, a structural change in the organization of production is more urgent than ever and that the art of politics and policy-making is the instrument by which that can be achieved.

In this connection, it is our most deeply held conviction that we cannot talk about development and equality without equal conditions for women, without physical, economic and decision-making autonomy. This requires a systematic defence of the integrality and indivisibility of rights and a search for a new equation between the State, society, the market and the family.

We are here today to reaffirm the principles of equality reflected in the Beijing Platform for Action, the Quito Consensus, the Brasilia Consensus, the Santo Domingo Consensus and, more recently, the Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development. It is about strengthening women's economic independence and consolidating the gains made in relation to physical and decision-making autonomy.

Today we are advocating an intergenerational and gender compact. We have an opportunity to deliver future generations from the scourge of poverty, from inequality and from a greater, more silent crisis: climate change. We have an ethical and political obligation to pave the way for women to fully exercise their freedoms.

That is who we are and why we are here, to engage in new developments, to pledge that we will not backslide, to arm ourselves with new arguments and capacities that allow us to return to our countries firm in our belief that gender equality is simply another name for freedom and democracy.

I hope that by scrutinizing our own reality our discussions from a regional perspective will help to ensure that the post-2015 development agenda includes our many pending challenges. Our discussions should also support the consolidation of positive changes that have already been made, especially those that improve the conditions for women to exercise autonomy, and help prevent the real risk of setbacks caused by economic, social, cultural or political factors.

Friends, I am sure this will be a productive day and a propitious occasion to define the common voice of our region. Our discussions are rooted in fertile soil and can only be enriched by listening to first-hand testimonies from our shared history.

When we use dialogue and exchange to build shared perspectives on the imperative of women's rights, not only do we give true meaning to the premise of democracy, but also we honour the memory of so many women who gave a face to and laid the foundations for our common heritage. Our efforts are a way of paying tribute to the work these women did to get us to this point —both those who were anonymous and those whose names are etched in history on their own merits.

I want to close with these words that evoke the reflections of an extraordinary woman, the admirable Julieta Kirkwood, who reminded us that “women, by recognizing and demanding their rights, clamoured for democracy through equality (...) female rebellion or reaction ensues when there is a record or awareness of the contradiction between the universal principles of theoretical equality proposed by society and the specific examples of inequality experienced between the sexes.”

Thank you.