Statement
by
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at the
Eleventh session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean,
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Michelle Bachelet, former President of Chile
Executive Secretary, Ms. Alicia Bárcena

Excellencies,
Colleagues and Friends,

Tenho muito gosto em estar aqui convosco hoje.

I am honoured to address the eleventh session of the Regional Conference on Women in the Latin America and the Caribbean, which will examine the achievements made in gender equality and the challenges still facing the region under the theme “What kind of State? What kind of equality?”
It is a topic of key importance for the Organization. Already in 1945, the Charter of the United Nations affirmed the principle of equality between women and men. Since then, the United Nations has helped shape the political discourse and establish a set of international norms and standards, goals, policies, strategies and programmes to promote the human rights and empowerment of women and girls worldwide. This is an achievement we can be truly proud of. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 remains at the heart of this normative and policy framework. 15 years on, its goals and call for action in 12 critical areas of concern remain just as fundamental, if not even more so, to achieve global goals across the three interlinked pillars of the United Nations – peace and security, development, and human rights.

Since the Beijing Conference, progress in implementation has been reviewed by all regions at five yearly intervals – in 2000, in 2005 and now in 2010. This review process provides us with a unique opportunity to highlight and celebrate achievements, as well as to identify gaps and challenges and discuss strategies on how to best address them in order to move towards full achievement of the goals of gender equality and empowerment of women.

At the 54th session of the Commission on the Status of Women held in March this year, the global community reviewed progress achieved in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. The Commission sent a strong political message of
recommitment to the full, effective and accelerated implementation of the Platform for Action and emphasized that accelerated implementation of the Platform contributes to the achievement of all Millennium Development Goals.

The review showed that there were many good and promising practices to build on, ranging from legislative change, policy development and capacity-building to sector-specific initiatives and efforts to improve data collection. The challenge ahead is to expand and apply such practices more systematically and consistently, and to replicate them wherever possible. These good practices need to become the basis for designing and implementing better policies and programmes.

In assessing progress, however, we also have to be self-critical. We need to acknowledge the gaps and challenges that prevent lasting and positive change in our countries and organizations so that we can effectively address them. From Beirut to Banjul, Geneva to Bangkok the message which resonated loud and clear was the need to move from commitment to action, to close the gap between what should be - according to law and policy - , and what is – the practice and realities of women’s and girls’ lives.

The regional reviews called for intensified efforts in a range of areas. I will highlight a few key points emphasized by several regions.
First, economic empowerment of women. It was noted that long-standing inequalities in access to economic and financial resources have placed women at a disadvantage in relation to men in economic development. Even when women’s participation in the workforce increased, they continued to be disproportionately over-represented in informal work, which is generally precarious, poorly paid, and not covered by labour legislation or social protection. The persistent unequal sharing of unpaid work between women and men, including care-giving, continued to limit women's opportunities for education, training, employment and political activity. According to the International Trade Union Confederation, women’s wages are 16.5 per cent less than men’s and many women continue to face discrimination in access to land, housing and property.

Second, participation of women in all areas of decision-making. As of May 2010, only about 25 countries – of which five were in the Latin American and Caribbean region - had reached 30 per cent or more women parliamentarians. Viewed against the 1995 record, this marks a significant increase, although still a far cry from our goal. However, the lack of reliable, comparable data in other areas, such as the media, academia, and the judiciary, remains a serious constraint. In the area of economic decision-making, reports demonstrated that women were consistently absent from key decision-making bodies influencing the distribution of resources in both public and private sectors.
Third, repeal of laws and elimination of policies and practices that discriminate against women and girls. In 2000, the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly called for the removal of laws which discriminate against girls and women by 2005. Regrettably, reports indicated that many such laws still exist across the globe. Even where non-discriminatory laws had been enacted, gaps in their enforcement were noted.

Fourth, violence against women. Efforts by many countries around the world to address violence against women and girls were acknowledged. Yet, its persistence remains a scourge to contend with. A number of countries indicated a rise in the number of reported cases of violence against women since 1995.

Fifth, women’s access to health services, including reproductive health services. This is an area where progress was least visible. Maternal mortality remained unacceptably high. What is more is that almost all these deaths could have been prevented. This is an area which requires urgent attention. The Economic and Social Council’s annual ministerial review focused on women’s health last year while at this year’s annual ministerial review, it has again been an area of focus in the context of gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Sixth, illiteracy. Despite all efforts exerted to provide education and improve its level, women illiteracy rates are still elevated in many countries and a lot of women continue to be functionally
illiterate or uneducated. This has resulted in lack of opportunities to enter the formal labour market, which in turn leads to high unemployment rate among women.

- Seventh, national machineries and other institutional mechanisms that work for gender equality and the empowerment of women. While countries have instituted national machineries for addressing gender equality and empowerment of women, these institutional mechanisms lack effective political support, have limited resources to carry out their work and limited access to key policy and decision-making processes. Their effectiveness in the implementation of policies and commitments is thus jeopardized.

- Eighth, sex-disaggregated quantitative and qualitative data, gender-sensitive indicators and gender-responsive budgeting and analysis. Availability of data has been stressed as critical to the work on gender equality and empowerment of women. Yet in many countries, capacity for undertaking gender analysis and for effectively integrating gender perspectives in policies, plans and programmes remained weak. This gap needs to be addressed.

Although these issues may not be new, what is new is the strong sense of urgency across regions for committed and accelerated action to address gender-based inequalities and discrimination, violations of women’s human rights and violence against women. This sense of urgency results from our acknowledgement that gender equality and
women’s empowerment are essential for the achievement of all internationally agreed development goals, including the MDGs.

The visible impact of the multiple global crises on individuals and communities has further heightened this sense of urgency and the need for a paradigm shift. The crises have generated a rethinking of past and present policies and strategies for growth and development. They provide an important opportunity to root strategies more firmly in the international legal and policy frameworks on gender equality of the 1990s, particularly the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

As demonstrated at this year’s session of the Commission on the Status of Women, there is a high expectation to turn the year 2010 into a year for accountability for gender equality and the empowerment of women.

[The outcomes of the review processes have provided important insights and contributions to other key intergovernmental processes this year, including: the recent Annual Ministerial Review held in conjunction with the high-level segment of the Economic and Social Council’s 2010 substantive session, which focused on "Implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to gender equality and the empowerment of women;" the high-level event on the Millennium Development Goals to be held in the General Assembly in September 2010 as well as the 10-year anniversary of Security Council resolution 1325 in October 2010.]
The recently adopted ECOSOC Ministerial Declaration reaffirmed that gender equality is essential to economic and social development, including the achievement of the MDGs. The Declaration highlights the need for action in a number of cross-cutting areas, including efforts to: address discriminatory attitudes and gender stereotypes, end all forms of discrimination and violence against women; promote the equal participation of women and men at all levels of decision-making; increase the involvement of men and boys in efforts to achieve gender equality; and strengthen the recognition of women's unpaid work. It also emphasizes a number of priority strategies to close implementation gaps. These include stronger political commitment and leadership by all stakeholders for gender equality; comprehensive national policies and action plans; mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the design and implementation of national policies/programmes; legal frameworks that promote gender equality; efforts to prevent and eliminate violence against women; and policies to promote women's economic empowerment and strengthen women's access to resources.

I wish to assure you that the United Nations stands ready to support Governments, civil society and other stakeholders in this region to ensure the full implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and other global commitments on gender equality at the country level.

In this regard, on 2 July 2010, the General Assembly established the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN WOMEN). The new entity consolidates and builds on
the important work of four previously distinct parts of the UN system which focus exclusively on gender equality and women’s empowerment: the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW); the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

Grounded in the vision of equality enshrined in the UN Charter, UN Women will, work for the elimination of discrimination against women and girls, the empowerment of women, and the achievement of equality between women and men as partners and beneficiaries of development, human rights, humanitarian action and peace and security. It is expected that the new entity will become operational on 01 January 2011. Last time I was here we lamented the slow pace of consultations in New York. Thanks to your determination UN WOMEN is now a reality. Congratulations to all of you who made this possible.

While in the past 15 years we have witnessed great advances for girls and women, much still remains to be done. Agreed commitments need to be turned into concrete and practical actions at the regional and national levels. Sectoral ministries including finance, economy, planning, education, health, environment and others must be engaged. Moreover, local and municipal authorities, parliaments, the private sector all have critical roles which they must fulfil if progress is going to be made.
Let me highlight the important role of civil society in this regard. Women's groups have shown tremendous creativity and determination in demanding concrete actions and commitments on gender equality, and holding their Governments accountable for delivering results. I wish to take this opportunity to applaud your work. Let us resolve to enhance our collaboration for change in the lives of the girls and women of this region and indeed of the world as a whole.

I thank you for your attention and wish you a successful and productive session.

Thank you.

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