

**Opening statement by Patricia Espinosa, Chairperson of the  
Presiding Officers of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin  
America and the Caribbean  
at the fortieth meeting of the Presiding Officers of the Regional  
Conference**

**Santiago, Chile**

**3 October 2006**

Good morning. I have the honour of addressing you today at the opening of the fortieth meeting of the Presiding Officers of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The results of this meeting, particularly its work in relation to two subject areas: women's contribution to the economy and social protection, particularly in relation to unpaid work performed by women, and political participation and gender parity in decision-making processes at all levels, will contribute to the preparatory process for the tenth session of the Regional Conference.

Intergovernmental forums such as the meetings of the Presiding Officers and the sessions of the Regional Conference provide a unique opportunity for analysing and seeking solutions on a number of issues of concern to us. As Chairperson of the Presiding Officers, I would therefore like to make a few remarks, in the belief that they will contribute to our work during these two days.

Regarding the document “The contribution of women to equality in Latin America and the Caribbean,” the annotated outline of which is on the agenda for our meeting, we must first of all recognize that, although the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women has provided for formal equality between men and women, there are still obstacles to real equality, compounded by the structural reforms and adjustment policies which have been implemented in the region. These have led to stresses which tend to widen the gap between the public and private spheres, depriving women of protection or emphasizing their responsibility for domestic tasks and caring for the family.

We should stress the importance of time-use surveys and the measurement of unpaid work as tools for identifying men’s and women’s workloads, so that we can analyse the structure of inequality, gender relations and the division of labour on gender lines in our region. These tools show how such factors have historically created obstacles for the advancement of women in all areas.

Such surveys have also given us a non-androcentric picture of gender differences in the use and allocation of time, in the amount of time available, and in harmonizing different activities. They also give us a basis for designing new forms of intervention to overcome the obstacles denying women access to the public sphere.

The tenth session of the Regional Conference will be a good opportunity for analysing the need to consider caregiving activities as a

public good within social security and as a social right, and for placing the issue of caregiving on the public agenda.

Another matter that must be considered is the differentiated impact of increased labour flexibility, which has not improved the quality of life for women workers in our region, but is reducing their protection and denying them access to social security, lowering their job security and impairing their acquired rights.

Hence the importance of ratifying the ILO conventions relating to women workers and maternity protection and the optional protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and of formulating appropriate public policies and harmonizing legislation.

Another related issue, which has already been discussed at ECLAC, is that of our social security systems which, although reformed, are gender-neutral and continue to discriminate against reproductive work. Furthermore, demographic changes and the feminization of ageing represent a challenge for Governments in terms of the need to ensure quality of life with dignity for older women.

The agenda for the session of the Regional Conference should include the subject of harmonizing paid employment with family responsibilities; the latter should be considered as a social responsibility rather than an individual one for women.

The other topic chosen by the Presiding Officers for this meeting is that of political participation by women. Given the current situation of the

women of our region, we must give priority to creating conditions so that they can build and develop a level of citizenship that will give them access to decision-making processes.

We know that the full exercise of citizenship is not just voting, but also real involvement in public affairs, and there has been progress in our region with the introduction of quotas. Although some still question these measures, we are convinced that they are needed in order to create the critical mass required for women to achieve, and keep, equal and equivalent positions.

At the same time, it is essential to transform gender relations in the private sphere; to eradicate from society's collective imagination and subjective perceptions those stereotypes which prevent acceptance of the belief that women and men are equal as human beings and of equal worth, and that parity begins at home through the redistribution of domestic issues, before it can be achieved in other areas.

Parity, therefore, entails a structural change in social relations. As Micaela Navarro<sup>1</sup> puts it, parity is part of the new social contract for the twenty-first century, in which public and family responsibilities are shared equitably between men and women.

The outcome of the discussions on these subjects to be held during the tenth session of the Regional Conference will be the basis for formulating new public policies and types of intervention to bring about

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<sup>1</sup> Counsellor for Social Equality and Well-being, Council of Andalucía, Spain

the necessary changes, and will influence the focus of the support provided by international cooperation.

On behalf of my colleagues and myself, I would like to thank and commend ECLAC for its help in preparing for the discussion of those ideas and concerns during this meeting which is beginning today.

This is my last meeting as Chairperson of the Presiding Officers, since my term as President of the National Women's Institute of Mexico is ending.

This term of office has been one of the most intense and demanding experiences of my political and professional life, and a great privilege which has irrevocably strengthened my commitment to women's human rights.

I am in no doubt that my colleagues feel the same.

On behalf of Mexico and my Government and also on my own behalf, I would like to express my gratitude for the invaluable contribution made by ECLAC and for the part played by the Women and Development Unit in moving forward the agenda of the women of our region. I would also like to thank the United Nations agencies and bilateral cooperation bodies, which have always shown commitment to the strengthening and sustainability of the situation of women.

The synergy we have created provides the necessary critical mass so that we can move forward towards fairer and more equal societies.

I come to the end of my mandate with the conviction that the Ecuador Consensus<sup>2</sup> will serve as a road map leading to the construction of democracy with parity in our region.

With these thoughts, I now declare open this fortieth meeting of the Presiding Officers. I would like to thank you all for being with us today and, as always, to thank the Women and Development Unit of the ECLAC secretariat for the quality of its support.

Thank you.

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<sup>2</sup> The document to be adopted by Governments at the tenth session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, to be held in Ecuador in August 2007.