

Fortieth meeting of the Presiding Officers of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Santiago, Chile, 3 and 4 October 2006

Opening session Tuesday, 3 October 2006, 9.00 a.m.

Opening statement by José Luis Machinea, Executive Secretary of ECLAC

ECLAC takes great pleasure in holding this fortieth meeting of the Presiding Officers of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean here at our home in Santiago, Chile.

I am happy to welcome the Chairperson of the Presiding Officers and President of Mexico's National Institute of Women, Patricia Espinosa, the ministers and other representatives of member countries serving as Presiding Officers, and the representatives of observer countries. Your presence here today demonstrates the importance attached by your countries to this meeting and to the goal of gender equity.

I would also like to express my appreciation for the presence of our colleagues representing specialized agencies and other organizations of the United Nations system, who attend and contribute to every meeting of the Presiding Officers.

The work of the Presiding Officers of the Regional Conference on Women constitutes a mechanism of the greatest importance. Between sessions of the Conference, they serve as a link between member Governments and the ECLAC secretariat, as well as among the Governments themselves, and follow up on the agreements adopted and the activities conducted pursuant to regional and international plans and programmes.

The meetings of the Presiding Officers provide a high-level forum for the discussion of public policies aimed at improving the situation of women and the exercise of their economic and social

rights. This forum is also an ideal venue for reaching agreement as to the priorities and strategic areas on which we must focus our efforts, according to the needs of the region. During the almost 30 years that have passed since its inception, this forum has demonstrated its relevance as well as the usefulness of continuing these meetings and creating closer links between the countries and ECLAC.

At the last session of the Commission, held in Montevideo in early 2006, the Governments requested ECLAC to explicitly include a gender perspective in studies, analyses and public policy proposals concerning issues of crucial importance for the region, such as:

- International migration, which is of concern to a great many countries, whether as countries of origin or as host countries for migratory flows (resolution 615(XXXI));
- Unremunerated work which underpins the everyday life of households and contributes to social protection for the population (resolution 618(XXXI));
- The impact on equity of sectoral reforms, particularly those dealing with health care and pension systems (resolution 626(XXXI)); and
- The preparation of plans of action to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (resolution 616(XXXI)).

We would like to take this opportunity to reiterate our commitment to the tasks entrusted to us. During this meeting, we will report on the progress we have made in each of these areas. The Commission also wishes to reiterate its institutional commitment to the goal of mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programmes in the United Nations system. Our task is not an easy one, and it may not be moving forward with the desired and necessary speed; but there are nonetheless a number of activities and outputs which we consider worthy of special mention and which encourage us to redouble our efforts.

These include the decision taken by ECLAC, together with other bodies in the United Nations system, to devote the first annual report on monitoring progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, following the inter-agency regional report produced in 2005, to:

- (1) Goal no. 3, which is to “Promote gender equality and empower women”, and
- (2) The Secretary-General’s recommendation on mainstreaming a gender perspective in the effort to implement and monitor the other Goals while seeking to identify the inescapable synergies

among them. We expect the report to be completed by the end of this year.

I would, in addition, like to draw your attention to the regional report on all forms of violence against women which is being prepared as an inter-agency effort for presentation on 25 November 2006. These are both examples of the United Nations system's coordinated operations in the region.

Our main objective today is to begin preparations for the tenth session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, to be held in 2007 in Quito, Ecuador. We have great expectations for this session.

First, I would like to stress the participatory nature of this process. Three preparatory subregional meetings are planned: one in Santiago, Chile, for South America, one in Guatemala for Central America and Mexico, and one in the Caribbean. In addition, continuing the innovative and fruitful experience we enjoyed in 2003 with the ninth session of the Conference, and taking full advantage of the opportunities provided by new information and communications technologies, two virtual forums will be held for ministers and leaders of national machineries for the advancement of women, one in English and one in Spanish.

The purpose of these meetings is to provide inputs for the position paper to be prepared by ECLAC for discussion during the tenth session of the Conference. The ECLAC secretariat will present an annotated outline of that document during this meeting. I am convinced that the dialogue that will take place here will enable us to draft a document that reflects the concerns we share in relation to the situation of women, the challenges facing our countries, and our determination to continue working to shape more egalitarian societies and to achieve an inclusive development process in which economic and social issues will be integrated into an increasingly democratic and just model of society.

Second, I wish to underline the importance of the two themes of the tenth session of the Conference. The first of them is the analysis of women's contribution to the economy and social protection, especially in relation to unpaid work. Thanks to the development of statistical systems and gender indicators, we now have much more information than we had in the past on women's contribution to the growth and development of countries, to the struggle to eliminate poverty and to the well-being of households. We do not yet know enough, however, about the importance of

unpaid work, health care, childcare and elder care, all of which is being performed without fanfare by millions of women who are sustaining the day-to-day functioning of their households and communities. We also lack in-depth knowledge of how men and women use their time and how they apportion their daily activities. In their present state, national accounts fail to take into account unpaid work and its contribution to countries' gross domestic products. Public policies fail to consider it, treating it as a private matter of interpersonal relations; the labour market disregards it, and cultures treat it as something that is almost entirely a matter for women and as a natural part of their role in society. This will certainly be an opportunity to move forward towards an economic, social and political valuation of such work and to define strategies for harmonizing the demands of family life with those of labour and public affairs for both men and women.

The second theme of the tenth session will be political participation and gender parity in decision-making at all levels. Democratic governance and the fuller exercise of citizenship in our countries call for active participation by women in political, economic and social decision-making processes. The uneven distribution of power between men and women, in both the public and private spheres, is one of the greatest obstacles to gender equality worldwide. Many of our countries have taken steps to speed up progress not only towards an increased presence of women in quantitative terms but also towards the consideration of women's problems, interests, needs and proposals when deciding which development paths to follow.

As was stated in the Regional Programme of Action and the Mexico City Consensus, the greatest of all the outstanding debts owed to gender equity in our countries have to do with combating the inequality affecting indigenous and Afrodescendent women, especially the poorest of them. In drafting this document we therefore hope to reflect the existing gaps and to build consensus on creative policy proposals for achieving more just and more egalitarian societies.

But this meeting of the Presiding Officers is not the only activity we have ahead of us during this busy week. We will also have the International Seminar on Gender Parity and Political Participation in Latin America and the Caribbean, which will no doubt provide a further stimulus for our debate.

The International Seminar will analyse the basis for women's political participation as a component of governance and democracy, affirmative action mechanisms and how they tie in with electoral systems, and policy strategies for citizen consensus and information.

I would like to express our special thanks to the Government of Chile for having promoted this initiative, which was approved by all the Governments of the region and organized jointly by ECLAC and the National Women's Service (SERNAM) of Chile. The presence of the President of Chile, Michelle Bachelet, at the opening of the seminar, together with the presence of all of you here and the participation of specialists, parliamentarians and civil society representatives from many different places, will surely lead to discussions and conclusions which will provide valuable inputs for the document to be presented at the tenth session of the Conference as well as a landmark event for the region.

I would like to thank you all once more for your presence here today, and wish you every success in your work.