

**Remarks by Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), at the opening session of the sixty-second meeting of the Presiding Officers of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean**

**Wednesday, 26 January**

**(Virtual meeting)**

Excellencies, representatives of ECLAC member States, representatives of international organizations;

Distinguished panellists, representatives of civil society organizations, in particular women's, feminist, youth and indigenous women's organizations and movements;

Friends;

I am honoured to participate in the opening session of this sixty-second meeting of the Presiding Officers of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean.

I would like to extend a special welcome to Mónica Zalaquett, Minister of Women's Affairs and Gender Equity of Chile, in her capacity as Chair of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, María-Noel Vaeza, Regional Director for the Americas and the Caribbean of UN-Women, and Elizabeth Gómez Alcorta, Minister for Women, Gender and Diversity of Argentina, in her capacity as representative of the country serving as Vice-Chair of the Commission on the Status of Women representing the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States (GRULAC). I would like to thank all three of them and their teams for their

collaboration in the preparation of this intergovernmental meeting, one that is vital for fostering political dialogue and cooperation amid these challenging times for the countries of our region.

Friends, this meeting is taking place against a backdrop of multiple uncertainties and rapid transformations that force us to address the imbalances, asymmetries and structural failures that predate the pandemic in the region and in the world, but which have worsened, disproportionately affecting women and deepening the structural challenges of inequality.

**We women have been on the front line of the pandemic response** and the importance of care and equality for the sustainability of life has never before been so clearly demonstrated.

The next Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, to be held this year in Argentina, will be an opportunity to redefine what is possible and to work on new political, social and fiscal compacts aimed at structural change for equality. **The care society holds the most promise for a transformative, sustainable and gender-equal recovery.**

Dear friends, as many of you know, the Secretary-General António Guterres and I have agreed that 31 March 2022 will mark the official end of my term as Executive Secretary of ECLAC.

As this is the last time I will be participating in the meeting of Presiding Officers in that capacity, allow me to **look back on how ECLAC has helped to advance gender equality in the region.** Over the past 13 years, ECLAC has supported the governments of Latin America and the Caribbean in their efforts to address

conceptual and public policy challenges to promoting sustainable development based on gender equality and women's autonomy.

To this end, we have incorporated feminist thinking and praxis into our critical analyses. These have made a crucial contribution to the understanding of economic dynamics and have challenged some assumptions of orthodox economics. For example, the concept of the sexual division of labour is key to understanding inequality in the region and how it is perpetuated in a culture of privilege that is also patriarchal and violent. The incorporation of these ideas has also helped to question the assumptions of some economic currents which focus exclusively on the market economy without taking into account the unpaid work carried out mainly by women, or those which measure growth solely on the basis of income. This is why I have insisted on **the importance of shifting the development narrative to include measurements that go beyond GDP per capita**. As I have said before, we cannot change only for things to stay the same. We must move from a culture of privilege to a culture of equality and sustainability.

In recent years, **ECLAC has been instrumental in establishing the concept of women's autonomy** as a key analytical category of public policy in the region. And this coincided with **the strengthening of State institutions for gender equality in the region**. This concept of autonomy—in its three dimensions: economic, physical and political—has been enriched not only by our on-going internal discussions, but also our dialogue with you, the Ministers and high-level authorities of machineries for the advancement of women, and our constructive and systematic debate with feminist and women's movements.

ECLAC has shared your conviction, taking up the issue at each session of the Conference, and in the Brasilia Consensus, adopted in 2010, it was emphasized that

**“economic autonomy for women is born out of the interrelationship between economic independence, sexual and reproductive rights, a life free from violence, and political parity”.** ECLAC has in recent years given greater emphasis to the **analysis of gender inequality and its ties to women’s lack of autonomy.** The **lack of autonomy is considered to be the result of injustice, the poor distribution of power, income and time between men and women and the lack of recognition of women’s and girls’ rights.**

And I would like to highlight this milestone, which strengthens the goal on **the empowerment of women and girls that was subsequently adopted in the 2030 Agenda.** It is clearly essential for women to acquire or strengthen their capacities, and enhance strategies and leadership, both individually and collectively, through empowerment. But empowerment must be manifested in autonomy. With your help, the region and ECLAC went a step further by **focusing on structural change for equality, with women’s autonomy at the core. Women’s autonomy and gender equality are therefore a precondition, a pathway and a catalyst for sustainable development and that is the powerful message the region is delivering to intergovernmental forums within the United Nations.**

We have also underscored that **formal equality is a necessary but insufficient condition for guaranteeing women’s rights and autonomy.** In line with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, there is a need for equality in the full exercise of rights in order to move from formal equality **to substantive equality or equality of results.**

This is why, at the thirteenth session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, ECLAC prepared and submitted for consideration a **strategy to achieve substantive equality. The Montevideo Strategy for Implementation of the Regional Gender Agenda within the Sustainable**

**Development Framework by 2030** reflects the region's effort to place gender equality and women's autonomy at the centre of the debate on sustainable development. The Strategy **recognizes that gender inequality is a structural feature of Latin America and the Caribbean, questions the unsustainability of the prevailing development model and proposes a vision of sustainable development that puts gender equality, human rights and women's autonomy at the centre.**

In turn, the understanding of gender inequality as a systemic issue is reflected in the four **structural challenges of gender inequality** we have identified: (i) socioeconomic inequality and the persistence of poverty; (ii) discriminatory, violent and patriarchal cultural patterns and the predominance of a culture of privilege; (iii) the sexual division of labour and the unfair social organization of care; and (iv) the concentration of power and hierarchical relations in the public sphere.

The Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean provides data on women's physical, economic and decision-making autonomy, their interrelationships and how they are manifested in the structural challenges of inequality. This is made possible through a collaborative effort with governments and with the strategic partners of the United Nations, intergovernmental organizations, and the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation, AECID. The Observatory is today a benchmark for analysis and action.

This brings me to the fourteenth session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, held two years ago in Santiago, at which ECLAC presented its **analysis focused on the processes of economic and financial globalization, the digital revolution, the care economy and climate change, and their main effects on women's lives in a shifting economic context.** In addition to confirming the continued relevance of the Regional Gender Agenda and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 25 years after adoption, the **Santiago**

**Commitment** is forward-looking, with agreements in areas that had not previously been addressed in the Regional Gender Agenda and that are crucial for responding to the emerging challenges for women in changing economic, demographic, climate and technological scenarios.

In anticipation of the worst socioeconomic crisis in 100 years resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, governments agreed in the Santiago Commitment to **implement gender-sensitive countercyclical policies in order to mitigate the impact of economic crises and recessions on women's lives and to galvanize the economy in key sectors, including the care economy.**

**Friends, the news is not encouraging.** Among developing regions, Latin America and the Caribbean was the hardest hit by the pandemic, with GDP falling by 6.8% in 2020. Almost two years after the onset of the health crisis, asymmetries in the distribution of wealth have increased, the gaps between developed and developing countries have widened, and the gender inequalities that are a structural feature of Latin America and the Caribbean have deepened.

The pandemic has widened the gaps and disproportionately harmed women, **who work in the sectors most affected by job losses.** The slow recovery of employment has accentuated the inequality between men and women. The participation rate for women in the third quarter of 2021 was 49.7%, compared to 71.5% for men. In both 2020 and 2021, unemployment and the drop in labour participation had a bigger impact on women. Among them, the most affected were those belonging to households in the first income quintile. In 2020, 27.7% women seeking jobs did not find one, compared to 22% of their male counterparts. In the highest income quintile, unemployment also had a larger impact on women than on men, although figures were much lower: 4.1% of women and 3.4% of men. More detailed

information will be presented tomorrow at the launch of the *Social Panorama of Latin America*.

The number of women who exited the labour force was greater than that of unemployed women, as many who want to work for pay have been unable to do so and have given up the search because of the overburden of care work in households. **The change in the number of employed persons says a lot about how the overburden of care work affects labour market participation and how this intensified during the pandemic. Among women this figure was 11.8% and among men it was 8.1% in households with children under 5 years of age.**

The discouraging data are not limited to economic autonomy. We must shed light on the shadow pandemic. Femicide and other forms of gender-based violence continue to affect women and girls in the region. According to the Gender Equality Observatory of ECLAC, at least 4,091 women were victims of femicide in 26 countries in the region in 2020 and **one in four girls and adolescent girls in Latin America and the Caribbean married for the first time or were in an early union before the age of 18. This is a harmful practice and a human rights violation that has not changed in the last 25 years.**

Friends, colleagues, there is much to be done. That is why I would like to conclude on a hopeful note.

We are proud of our work **to break the statistical silence**. The importance of consolidating **statistical institutions** that place equality and sustainability at the centre of agendas, policies and development models was underscored at the eleventh meeting of the Statistical Conference of the Americas of ECLAC, held in November 2021.

I would like to recognize the **machineries for the advancement of women** in particular. The progress in institutionalization has yielded substantial results in the implementation of gender mainstreaming strategies in various sectors and at different State levels. Protecting decades of progress, strengthening financing and decisively counteracting the threats and setbacks caused by the crisis is a major challenge.

We at ECLAC would also like to explicitly recognize the invaluable work of **women's and feminist movements of the region** in favour of gender equality. The creativity, persistence and talent of these movements added energy and proposals to our work.

The region also has the Escazú Agreement, which entered into force in April 2021. In a region where environmental defenders are under serious threat, and where women fight for their territories and communities even at the risk of their lives, the Escazú Agreement is a valuable tool to protect their rights while protecting the environment and promoting sustainable development in the region. The Agreement offers a path to advance in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and build a more egalitarian and inclusive model.

In these years at the helm of ECLAC, I have worked with a wonderful and committed **team to ensure equality is a path and a goal in the Commission's thinking and action**. And we have done so by consolidating the Division for Gender Affairs itself, and its feminist leadership, but especially with you, with an ambitious, progressive and innovative regional gender agenda.

Latin America and the Caribbean is a pioneering region, and the only one in the world where, for more than four decades, we have met at the Regional Conference

on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean. As a result of this coordinated work, the **Regional Gender Agenda** has been promoted as a road map for closing the gaps in the implementation of gender policies and advancing towards a transformative recovery with equality.

Friends, the pandemic is not over yet. And with a development model associated with the concentration of wealth, environmental deterioration, the climate and care crisis, the increasing precariousness of women's living conditions and societies marked by patriarchy, racism, violence, inequality and the culture of privilege, we cannot return to a "normal" that has produced enormous inequalities, poverty and suffering.

**It is imperative that we accelerate the pace towards substantive equality. We need an urgent change in the development model to move towards a care society in which there is recognition of the interdependence between people and between productive processes and society, and that places the sustainability of human life and the planet at the centre.**

**Rebuilding with equality and sustainability is the way forward for the region.**

I would not want to miss this opportunity to thank you for your work over the years; for the strength, courage, ability and creativity of Latin American and Caribbean women and their organizations. I am very proud to have accompanied you in these years of collective building.

Count on ECLAC to continue promoting policies and partnerships to protect the progress in guaranteeing women's rights achieved in the past decade, to avoid setbacks and to promote a transformative recovery with gender equality, based on

the feminist principles of redistribution of power, resources and time. Count on ECLAC to help transform not only economies but societies as a whole, placing the care of people, the planet and the sustainability of life at the centre. The ultimate goal must be to advance towards the building of fair and egalitarian development models.

Together we can do more and better for a sustainable, inclusive and resilient recovery in Latin America and the Caribbean. **I repeat: the post-pandemic recovery of Latin America and the Caribbean will be feminist or it will not *be*.**

I would like to conclude with the reflection of an extraordinary Chilean woman, Julieta Kirkwood, who reminded us that in recognizing and claiming their rights, women claim equality and democracy, and feminine rebellion or resistance arises when there is acknowledgement or awareness of the contradiction between the universal principles of theoretical equality proposed by the social organization and the actual experiences of inequality between the sexes.

Thank you very much.