

## **Opening remarks**

### **Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda, UN Assistant Secretary-General and UN Women Deputy Executive Director for Normative Support, UN System Coordination and Programme Results**

#### **Inauguration of the 66th Meeting of the Presiding Officers of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean**

**Wednesday, 4 December 2024, 10:00 am – 10:45 am**

Good morning. Latin America and the Caribbean Member States, Civil Society colleagues, and the young leaders in the house.

It is an incredible opportunity to be present with you today at the 66th Meeting of the Presiding Officers of the Regional Conference on Women.

It is my first time with you, since I assumed the duties as the Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director of UN Women. Allow me to convey the warm greetings from our Executive Director, Dr. Sima Bahous.

I also want to extend my deep-felt appreciation to our Executive Secretary for ECLAC, Mr. José Manuel Salazar, for hosting us today, here, at this inspiring space, with a deep history in ECLAC. Thank you for the unwavering commitment to gender equality, women's human rights, empowerment, and really for driving the thinking in the region.

I am also honored to be here with you, Excellency Ingrid Gómez. Thank you so much, and congratulations on heading the Secretariat for Women in Mexico. It's very important to continue to see strong institutions for gender equality. Allow me to congratulate Mexico on electing its first female head of state. This is moving the target for SDG5. Congratulations, and thank you.

I salute all the Ministers, high-level authorities, feminist leaders, and civil society advocates in the room. In the last 24 hours, I've had an extraordinary opportunity to meet with the women's movement, the networks, and the young people in this region, so I come to you this morning so energized because I've connected with some of those experiences, the thoughts in our communities and also the dreams, the passion for not just the present but also for the future.

I want to recognize Ana Güzemes Garcia, my colleague María Noel, and all the teams that have worked very hard in the preparations of this regional meeting.

Being here, in Latin America and the Caribbean, I feel I'm home. I belong, and you allow me to settle my soul and say I connect with the history of my own people. As an African woman, when I come to this region, I start to see the experience of history over 300 - 400 years ago, of the massive movement of people around the world. Allow me to just say it because it's part of the reality of who we are.

It's very special. It's my first time in Chile, and I want to express UN Women's extraordinary appreciation to the honorable Minister of Women Affairs, Minister Antonia Orellana. Thank you for receiving us and for meeting with me.

I also want to appreciate that Chile chaired ECOSOC last year and appreciate the leadership of Ambassador Paula Narvaez and the extraordinary role they played in advancing gender equality. Indeed, the very first Executive Director of UN Women was from this country, Madame Michelle Bachelet. She was the first-ever Executive Director of UN Women. She midwived the organization for whom we are today and left it vibrant; therefore, as Member States, you continue to carry us as UN Women with that vibrancy. With that clarity, that is about gender equality, women's rights, and empowerment for all, as the UN System, and for that, we are grateful.

Latin America and the Caribbean have never waited for change. You are a region that has made change happen, the region that has been trailblazing within the multilateral system for many years.

The first UN World Conference for Women was in this region, in Mexico, in 1975. We recognize, and we appreciate it. So, yes, we are observing the 30 years since the 1995 World Conference, but we remember that we were at the first conference in this region 50 years earlier. So, thank you so much. Thank you for the groundbreaking Belem do Para Convention on violence against women in 1994. Many years back, we already had a convention to fight violence against women and to advance the normative work, a convention which is now being replicated in many other regions like the Istanbul Convention in Europe and the convention Africa is working on as well on violence against women. So, this is a region that has always trailblazed.

As we observe the 16 Days of Activism, we remember the efforts spearheaded by the Dominican Republic for a UN resolution designating the 25<sup>th</sup> of November as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, honoring the legacy of the Mirabal sisters, but women do not have to continue to die in order for us to commemorate events. Let the story of the Mirabal sisters not continue to be the story so that it's not about femicide and death, but it's about human rights and about the future for all people.

Originating in Argentina, Ni Una Menos sparked a truly global movement against gender-based violence, spanning over 50 countries, uniting women worldwide in the fight for justice.

More recently, this is the region which hosted the pivotal discussions around our planet's future at COP16 in Cali and the Small Islands Developing Nations SIDS4 Conference in Antigua and Barbuda. I was honored to be present. And I continued to ask myself, "Why do they call them Small Island Development States?" Because of population and GDP? Maybe they are Significant Island Developing States because there are significant human beings in these small islands. It's not about population. It's not about GDP. It's about humanity.

Meanwhile, the Escazu Agreement has earned international recognition for its pioneering approach to environmental governance and human rights. The women activists and environmental and human rights defenders of Latin America and the Caribbean continue to stand tall as guardians of our planet and the most precious resources that we have. Your wisdom continues to inspire us. We continue to draw on that Escazu Agreement, to draw on the commitment over the years as you now offer leadership around the care systems and care policies. Congratulations on that leadership.

We gather at a critical juncture. Yes, challenges persist—sluggish economic growth, unrelenting inequalities, violence and instability, discrimination in all its forms fueled by hate speech, by rhetoric, by claw back, regressions on hard-fought gains, and the erosion of democratic values - all weigh very heavily on our hearts.

Indeed, dismantling patriarchy and gender stereotypes remains critical. Advancing democracy through gender equality and women's participation remains so critical and pivotal at this moment.

Excellencies, colleagues,

Far too often, for women and girls, the promises of the global commitments, norms and standards remain unfulfilled. This is the last 5-year anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, and it is also just five years as we move into the year 2030. Yet, we are off-track. But this is our last chance to finish strong and truly move the needle for women and girls everywhere. The countdown is on, and the urgency has never been greater.

Let us seize this moment to renew our commitment to the commitments made in 1995—a vision of equality, a vision of justice, and empowerment for all women and girls—a time to transform our society.

As we approach Beijing+30, UN Women is calling on all States, civil society, and other actors to really unite towards a package of focused, relevant, and effective measures. This must deliver tangible benefits for all women and girls, drive substantial progress, and make a significant difference as we count to 2030.

We are looking at a resolute, multilateral system that is fit for purpose to deliver for women and girls. Therefore, looking forward to the revitalization of the Commission on the Status of Women as was agreed at the Pact for the Future and looking forward to your adoption of the political declaration at CSW69.

The ECOSOC this year adopted a resolution, and indeed it was part of your discussion in last year's General Assembly and the Pact for the Future. It notes that the world is still working towards gender parity and women's decision-making at all levels in all institutions.

So, as UN Women, within our mandate to advocate for women's decision-making, we are also looking at a moment when we can say, "Good morning, Madame Secretary-General."

You can continue to count on UN Women, to count on the leadership that we have in this region, including through our Regional Director, María Noel Vaeza and colleagues and the presence that we have in this region to continue to support your efforts.

We believe in the primary role of the Member States to deliver the services, the policies and offer the resources so that little girls, like me, born in my village, can know that another world is possible.

Your Excellencies, delegates,

I was in Beijing in 1995, and I feel the progress that you have made, but I also feel the pain. We continue to cry with one eye as we watch the situations in some of our countries, including Haiti. But you also continue to smile when we see the opportunities that are there.

I conclude by making this call for also investing in the little girls. My mother did not choose my father. No, she didn't. She was married off. So, at times, I ask, "Am I a product of just biology or a product of love?" What does it mean when women are raped and give birth to children? What does it mean for children like me?

The issues we are talking about are not issues that are remote from the reality of our lives, and therefore I'm very much committed because this is about our lives, our countries, and the opportunities that you offer as our Member States to say another world is possible. Another reality is possible, a reality in which we can enjoy equality of opportunities, irrespective of race, class, disability like me, having a disability or any other "ism" that breaks opportunities for us that we can enjoy and access our human rights, that we can be empowered to contribute to the wellbeing of our society, and we can continue to care for the planet and people.

Again, thank you so much for having us.