

**Opening remarks by Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive  
Director of UN Women, Sima Bahous, at the First Regular Session of the  
UN Women Executive Board  
14 February 2022**

***Firm resolve, strategic focus and solidarity***

[As delivered]

I am delighted to join you in the First Regular Session of the UN-Women Executive Board 2022 – my first as Executive Director.

Please allow me to congratulate the President of the Executive Board on her election. Madam President H.E. Ms. Fatima Rabab, my esteemed friend, I know that we can count on you and your expert leadership going forward.

I also warmly congratulate the Members of the Bureau on their election for 2022 as regional representatives. I thank the Vice Presidents in advance for their support to the Board's decision-making processes, knowing they will help us to arrive at consensus.

I thank H.E. Ms. María del Carmen Squeff of Argentina; H.E. Mr. Alhaji Fanday Turay of the Republic of Sierra Leone; H.E. Sergiy Kyslytsya of Ukraine; and H.E. Mr. Jörundur Valtýsson of Iceland.

I am proud to welcome such a high-level Bureau, composed entirely of Permanent Representatives. This is a first for the UN-Women Executive Board. In doing so, you have sent a strong signal that women's empowerment and gender equality are at the top of your agenda.

I address you today with gratitude and humility. I am fully aware of the tremendous trust the Secretary-General, and you, the Executive Board and all Member States, have placed in me, leading UN-Women into its second decade. I extend my deepest appreciation to you all.

Multilateralism is needed today more than ever; it is only together that we will find solutions that work for the issues that impact us all. I count on your candid advice and on your determination to accelerate the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals. You are our bridge to the multilateral space, and to the people we serve.

As a measure of the significance I attach to this esteemed body, and my commitment to you, I have brought the Executive Board Secretariat directly under my leadership, to ensure that our dialogue is direct and open.

This first regular session of the Executive Board for the year opens with firm resolve, strategic focus and solidarity. We meet at a time when the external landscape gives the UN strong and rightful cause for concern.

The Secretary-General began his second term with a stark reminder: “gender inequality and discrimination against women and girls are perhaps the most overwhelming injustice across the globe”. This injustice permeates the biggest challenges of our time, including our response to COVID-19, peace and security, and the climate emergency.

We have just over eight years to go until 2030, and we know that where we have the most work to do is on gender equality. In fact, globally only one of the 18 indicators on SDG 5 is ‘close to target’. That indicator is of women in local governance, where we do see, and must celebrate, progress in most countries.

Unless we realize our collective gender equality goals, we will not address hunger and climate change. We will not negotiate durable peace, nor see an increase in social and economic policies that work for all people. Women must be part of – and lead – these critical discussions. We all know that women bear the brunt of crises and conflict.

The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a ‘revealer’, exploiting, and worsening existing inequalities, including gender inequalities. Women have been on the frontlines as health care workers, as caretakers of their families, and as home schoolteachers. Women who were already disadvantaged in the labour force have lost their jobs at a faster rate than men, and are regaining them at a slower rate. Women, who were already doing the vast majority of unpaid care work, have taken on even more unpaid work during the pandemic. Violence against women and girls, already the most pervasive of human rights abuses, has spiraled upwards during the crisis in every corner of the world.

Yet, the COVID-19 policy response has too often not been inclusive of women’s voices. Women hold only 24 per cent of seats on COVID-19 taskforces, so three quarters of the policy response is driven by men and men’s priorities. The path to equality, therefore, remains steep.

I take the helm here with humility but also with great pride in what has already been achieved in the previous decade. Today, together, we look ahead. We look ahead with both optimism and impatience at the work needed to achieve true equality for every woman and girl.

UN-Women has an important intergovernmental mandate. In a few weeks, the Commission on the Status of Women will convene, this year focusing on “Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes”.

This theme goes to the core of our shared development challenges: gender equality and climate change. It is an opportunity for you to make bold commitments for women and girls, and to build on COP26 ahead of our Board Member, Egypt, convening us for COP27. This will be my first CSW as Executive Director of UN-Women, and I very much look forward to the enriching discussions, and to the strong conclusions that I hope you will reach.

Beyond the normative space, UN-Women also holds two additional, but equally principal, mandates – of UN system coordination and operational activities. That makes this organization unique in its work, and also in our responsibility to advance progress for the people we serve, not only through our own efforts, but also through our partnerships.

I have spent the first four short months in office actively listening and engaging. I have met with you – Member States, with the UN system, with civil society, with the private sector, with youth, with academia and with my own teams. Clearly, we must act as an accelerator of SDG5, but also for the other 16 goals, which equally impact the lives of women and girls. To achieve this, we must also work with and through others.

I have identified three immediate accelerators for UN-Women.

First is the implementation of the Strategic Plan 2022-2025. The UN-Women Strategic Plan that you endorsed last year constitutes a common vision to implement globally the gender equality mandate that you entrusted us with in 2010, when the General Assembly Resolution created UN-Women.

Our Strategic Plan 2022-2025 is informed by rich evidence and lessons learned from UN-Women's first decade. We must build on our strengths. This includes our gender equality expertise and thought leadership. We are the single largest repository of gender equality experts in the UN system, and our teams are our greatest asset.

We must step up our efforts to maximize our impact. We will retain our focus on the four established areas of expertise where we are already recognized as global thought and practice leaders.

Under my leadership we will continue to build our world-class knowledge and programming that can benefit women and girls everywhere. As also outlined in the Strategic Plan, our work will be more integrated, cutting across the thematic areas and our triple mandate. Our Strategic Plan will be our north star, our roadmap, and the basis against which we measure impact. Its deep roots in the SDGs will allow us to advance our shared development goals. However, as we have heard from the President, H.E. Ambassador Fatima, implementing the plan is not enough. We must also be able to meaningfully tell the story of impact.

Indeed, communication and advocacy are at the core of our work and we need to harness their power to effect positive change, to inform, to raise awareness, to expand our thought leadership and influence. When we are able to tell the stories of change in a way that resonates with our development partners, and especially with the communities we serve, then we are better able to realize and sustain our impact. I intend to strengthen and refocus our advocacy and communication efforts, both at headquarters and in the field.

My second priority, integrally linked to our Strategic Plan, is to boost our coordination role and to place UN-Women at the heart of a reformed UN development system. This is at the core of our triple mandate. Just as the work on gender equality is not confined to one department in government, it is not confined to one UN entity. While gender equality is conceptually at the heart of the 2030 Agenda, it is not yet sufficiently incorporated into the UN's everyday work on the SDGs. This needs to change.

For women's and girls' lives to truly improve, we need to bring UN-Women's acumen and expertise to discussions and action across the spectrum, from domestic and foreign policy, to budgets, and the economy, to advancing sustainable development, and to peace and security.

As a first step, I have started to work with my counterparts across the UN System through a series of strategic dialogues, to build the foundation for this work. We will continue to actively engage in the Common Country Assessment and the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework processes to drive a shared gender equality agenda.

The Secretary-General's vision in *Our Common Agenda* has equally placed a great focus on gender equality. It has identified concrete actions we have to take to advance women's empowerment, including through enhanced coordination. UN-Women is proud to be leading in several of the direct actions identified, and is working across the UN system in support of this vision.

*Our Common Agenda* also calls for greater multi-stakeholder partnerships, which is a challenge UN-Women is well placed to take on through our coordination mandate and our convening power. As our Strategic Plan says, "UN-Women will work with a variety of stakeholders to ensure that women's and youth organizations are adequately resourced. This includes convening policy makers and donor partners to advocate through voluntary multistakeholder partnership efforts, such as the Generation Equality Forum."

Last week, the Secretary-General referenced the gender review of the UN system that his office is undertaking, aiming to strengthen the ability of that system to deliver on gender equality, with UN-Women as the driver, and at its heart. We welcome this review, which builds on previous reform processes to make the UN system fit for purpose to deliver on the SDGs, and look forward to supporting its outcomes.

We need concerted action at country level. And that is why my third priority for UN-Women is to ensure a pivot to the field. As you know, we have already been working hard to recalibrate and re-capacitate our presence in our country offices. I aim to deepen this work to strengthen our collaboration in the countries.

Just as we insist on putting women at the centre of decision-making to achieve gender-sensitive results, I insist on our work being driven by local solutions, where we listen to, and learn from, the lived experiences of women and girls in the countries. This means naturally that we will be seeking to deepen and broaden our relationship with Member States, civil society, youth, academia and others. It also means reviewing our means, human and financial, to ensure that resources are invested where they are needed most. And it means that our structure as an organization must match our ambition, and the trust you have placed in us to deliver. Linked to this will be the continued strengthening of management culture, internal accountability, and a focus on delivering for results.

As I consider all three of the critical priorities I have identified, it is very clear that resources matter. First let me thank all our donors for their support with those resources under the immensely difficult circumstances of these last years. Preliminary figures for 2021 indicate that UN Women's Total Contributions Revenue was around US\$545.1 million, almost matching the 2020 unprecedented high of US\$548.6 million. In particular, I recognize the significant increases from the Governments of France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg and Norway in Regular Resource contributions.

In the context of UN-Women's tenth consecutive unqualified audit opinion on its Financial Statements that underlines our effective and efficient operations, I ask our funding partners to make sure we are resourced to do the job you have mandated us to do.

This is vital as we embark on our new Strategic Plan, which holds such promise for the acceleration of impact. And that is why we must also broaden our strategic partnerships to include financial institutions and others in ensuring that we work towards sustainable finance mechanisms.

In addition, I ask for a constant reflex to apply a gender lens that is shaped by the knowledge, expertise and voices of women themselves. And I ask that beyond your support of UN-Women, you and your governments take the cause of SDG 5 and gender equality with you, wherever you go, and that it invigorates all your engagements.

I thank you very much.