

Opening Remarks by Sima Bahous, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN Women, to the UN Women Executive Board Second Regular Session 2022

13 September 2022

[As delivered]

Living up to our crucial mandate

I am pleased to welcome you to the Second Regular Session of the UN Women Executive Board 2022. Let me start by warmly congratulating H.E. Ambassador Mohammed Abdul Muhith, Permanent Representative of Bangladesh, on his election as President of UN Women's Executive Board. We look forward to working with you, Your Excellency, in the remainder of 2022, and count on your support for our important work at this session and in the months to come.

Allow me to once more thank our outgoing President, H.E. Ambassador Fatima Rabab, for her efforts during her tenure as the President of the Executive Board of UN Women. We congratulate her for her appointment by the Secretary-General to the honourable position of High Representative of the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States. I look forward to working together with her to advance gender equality.

As this is our final formal session in 2022, I would also like to give special thanks to the Vice-Presidents of the 2022 Bureau: the Permanent Representatives of Argentina, Her Excellency Maria Del Carmen Squeff; Iceland, His Excellency Jorundur Valtýsson; Sierra Leone, His Excellency Alhaji Fanday Turay; and Ukraine, His Excellency Sergiy Kyslytsya, for their efforts this year and for their significant contributions.

It is a pleasure to be back with you after a rewarding and successful Annual Session. I consider you, the UN Women Executive Board, to be our closest partner. Our proceedings and their success are among my highest priorities. I have been, as you have seen, fully engaged with you all. And I am keen to continue this rewarding engagement. Your guidance and cooperation are invaluable as we strive to advance the gender equality and women's empowerment agenda together.

Our agenda in this session covers key areas of our work. We will look at our financing. We will continue the discussion we began in the Annual Session about the state of our oversight mechanisms, and how they might be strengthened. We will also hear about UN Women's work in sub-Saharan Africa as our regular operational update.

Importantly, around this session there have been and will be informal briefings on crucial issues, and I thank the Bureau for having requested these. As you know, I have made it a priority to strengthen our ethics function, and I appreciate the contributions and reflections made in the recent informal on that topic. The informal discussions on Afghanistan and Palestine, food security and our humanitarian work speak to the heart of what UN Women contributes to crisis response. This is an area that I am acutely aware we need to continue to grow and strengthen. It is key to our relevance and mandate in a period where crisis preoccupies us. This includes COVID-19, climate and conflict.

As always, our discussions in this Board will be set against a backdrop of some collective progress, but also ongoing challenges. Our mandate is as relevant as it has ever been. COVID, climate and conflict, have made, and are making, women and girls more vulnerable to violence. They are undermining economic opportunities. Opportunities for everyone to benefit from women's leadership are being

squandered. We continue to fail to find an approach to crisis that properly protects women and girls but more importantly leverages their leadership and capabilities.

UN Women continues its work in all these areas, working in close coordination with our UN sister entities and a range of partners, both across the world, and through the intergovernmental spaces where Member States craft the collective actions that these challenges demand.

I have just returned from a mission to the United Arab Emirates. I met with government officials to discuss expanding our partnership, including on the road to a gender equal COP28. I also participated in a global conference on Women, Peace and Security and had the privilege of meeting 140 female cadets from African, Asian and Arab countries participating as the third cohort in a Women, Peace and Security leadership initiative under the auspices of Her Highness Sheikha Fatima Bint Mubarak. It was part of an inspiring partnership between UN Women, the Ministry for Defence and General Women's Union in the UAE. A total of 555 women have been trained and the number will grow. The Mission also provided an opportunity to meet with a number of Ministers in charge of the Gender and Development agendas in their countries.

I also visited Colombia in early August where I had the honour to attend the inauguration of H.E. President Gustavo Petro and Vice-President H.E. Francia Márquez, the country's first Afro-Colombian Woman Vice President. The new Government has committed to prioritize peace and gender equality, and I have pledged UN Women's unwavering support to their efforts including in partnership with and through the UN Verification Mission in Colombia.

These missions, like others I have undertaken since the start of my term, have highlighted for me the importance of our mandate and of how essential UN Women's success is for everyone, everywhere. Given that importance, I believe it is appropriate to use the opportunity of this Second Regular Session to offer some reflections from my first year in leading UN Women and the majority of the first year of implementation of our Strategic Plan.

I offer these reflections in the spirit of our accountability to you, and to highlight key outcomes for your guidance and support. I ask for your understanding that this may mean I take more time than I usually would with these remarks. This reflects my wish to give you the best overview possible.

We have focused on a number of priorities during this period, but I will highlight three.

First, as you are aware, many of our plans coming into 2022 were reshaped by the war in Ukraine. This followed on the heels of an ongoing and acutely "gendered" crisis in Afghanistan. Other crises were no less important, and I will say more on these in a moment. But I would like to start with Ukraine and Afghanistan as bellwethers of how UN Women has been able to step up its contribution over the last year.

In Ukraine we have expressed all aspects of our mandate, working with the Governments of Ukraine and neighbouring countries to support their efforts for women and girls. We have directed resources and assistance to crucial frontline women's civil society organizations to provide lifesaving services; worked with our UN sister entities to ensure the most gender-responsive humanitarian action the system and its partners can offer; and where needed, offered services ourselves. Our rapid gender analyses have been crucial orientations for everyone seized of the situation including donor, UN and civil society partners.

In Afghanistan we have remained on the ground throughout. We are scaling up provision of services for women, by women to meet overwhelming needs; supporting women-led businesses, and employment opportunities for women across all sectors; investing in women-led civil society organizations, to support the rebuilding of the women's movement; and tirelessly advocating throughout for restoring, protecting and promoting the full spectrum of women's and girls' rights and creating spaces for Afghan women themselves to advocate for their right to live free and equal lives.

You will also hear today about our work in sub-Saharan Africa, which is very much a priority region for UN Women. We will address the impacts of different sorts of crises in a continent where COVID has set back progress toward gender equality by at least a generation. As much as anywhere in the world, Africa has seen, and sees, climate change and conflict intersect. Women and girls as ever pay the highest price. But we also see the power of women's political leadership and examples that the world would do well to emulate. We will share how UN Women is supporting African governments and people in building an environment where women and girls enjoy their human rights fully, where their contribution is maximized and valued, and where they benefit equally from its dividend.

We are doing similar work on the ground in crisis situations around the world, from Haiti, to the Lake Chad Basin, to Somalia, Afghanistan and Ukraine, and in response to the Syrian refugee crisis in Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and much more.

UN Women's expert recommendations on policy response to crises provide the essential gender lens on targeted action. Our upcoming brief on the impacts of the Ukraine war in terms of food, energy and finance across the world is a case in point, where we have supported the integration of a gender equality perspective within the work of the Secretary-General's Global Crisis Response Group. We have highlighted how the crisis has exacerbated the gender gap in food insecurity, reversed progress on access to modern energy and caused a return to use of unhealthy biomass for fuel for cooking and heating. We raised the alarm on increases in gender-based violence, transactional sex for food and survival, sexual exploitation and trafficking, child marriage with girls forced to leave school, and women's and girls' unpaid care and domestic workloads to provision households and communities further endangering women's and girls' physical and mental health.

Furthermore, throughout the COVID pandemic, we drew on the diverse tools with which our mandate equips us, from influencing fiscal stimulus and public investments in the care economy, supporting gender-responsive social protection systems, to rapid data collection and accountability mechanisms.

All of these demonstrate how we have stepped up and made an essential contribution in crisis. In our current global context I consider this a litmus test of our value and our relevance.

The mandate afforded us in General Assembly Resolution 64/289 was not limited by an assumption of stability in the contexts in which we operate. The General Assembly asked us to express the mandate, including crucially the coordination mandate, in all situations and across all aspects of the work of the UN System. That includes in crisis and humanitarian situations.

This has been and will continue to be a priority for UN Women and for me as long as it is central to the reality of the lives of the world's women and girls and their sustainable development paths. And in a world wracked with conflict we sadly cannot expect this to change soon.

Tomorrow's crises are already revealing themselves to us, with hunger and drought and the instability they bring, or the impact of increasingly frequent natural disasters such as the devastating flooding now affecting the people of Pakistan. In this regard I am pleased to share that, following with my most recent meeting with the Emergency Relief Coordinator, he confirmed his support for UN Women's membership of the Inter Agency Standing Committee. As many of you know, this is something we have long considered necessary to bring our expertise and mandate to the UN's humanitarian efforts. I know this has been an ambition that many of you have supported for a number of years. Martin Griffiths and I will be keeping in contact on this to make it happen, and I look forward to updating you accordingly.

I also look forward to your ongoing and enhanced support for our work in crisis. I ask you to join your voices with ours in insisting that collective response to crisis protects and empowers women and girls as it should and as it must. I call on you to ensure that those actions you take, support and fund are gender responsive.

We must all hold ourselves and each other accountable for delivering for women and girls. This is not primarily because they need us, nor that they have a right to expect our support, even though they absolutely do. Rather it is because we need them. The world needs women and girls. We need their leadership, their partnership and their activism. We cannot achieve the vision of the UN Charter, the 2030 Agenda and Our Common Agenda unless women and girls play their fullest part and bring their best contribution, in particular in crisis.

As a second priority, I have insisted that UN Women strengthens its engagement with Member States, growing its advocacy and policy capacities to support solutions to problems that are intractable without them, including through our normative work. Many of you will have seen that in the energy, expertise and approaches we brought to bear in this year's Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). We came to CSW66 and its crucial theme of climate change knowing that success would demand UN Women's best contribution as an essential part of our collective best efforts.

We are all aware that it cannot be taken for granted that any session of the Commission will have as fruitful an outcome as we might wish. This year we contended with political tremors from the war in Ukraine which had proven disruptive in other intergovernmental spaces. We had a priority theme which had already been challenging in terms of intergovernmental agreement at COP26 in Glasgow.

Given this, it is to our collective credit that we achieved what we did, with powerful Agreed Conclusions that have already started to define the gender perspective on perhaps the most urgent imperative of our time – climate change.

As another example, we are working more closely now with the Security Council thanks to the increased focus on Women, Peace and Security that we see coming from its Members. I myself have briefed the Council four times since taking office, and we have offered a range of support such as helping to identify briefers, including from civil society. You should expect to see this focus at the upcoming General Assembly, COP27 and beyond.

Our ability to bring together and help groups of actors collectively achieve more than they could individually for gender equality is not limited to the intergovernmental space. It extends to other constituencies also, not least our civil society partners who called so effectively for our creation, and have stood alongside us since then. Increasingly among them we include youth-led civil society organizations. They represent the future of the women's movement and we must ensure we offer them

all our support. More recently we have expanded our engagement with International Financial Institutions (IFIs), as we have shared with you before.

You are aware of our efforts also for Generation Equality. This remains a corporate priority and we have been particularly encouraged to see the number of commitments from actors from all sectors and parts of the world grow from the 1000 secured by the conclusion of the Mexico City and Paris Forums in 2021, to some 2000 today. Generation Equality is also proving to be a framework for action at country level. For example, Kenya and Tanzania have established national advisory committees on Generation Equality implementation. And we continue to build further on the youth engagement structures around Generation Equality as an entry point for our work with this crucial group of stakeholders.

Looking forward we are sharpening the focus on accountability. We have already launched an online Commitments Dashboard to make every commitment visible and searchable. This month we will publish our first accountability report on the sidelines of the General Assembly.

I am also determined that we successfully manage the challenges inherent in private sector engagement, and continue to achieve results through our convening role. For example, the Unstereotype Alliance, for which we are the Secretariat and which I chair, brings together leading actors in the marketing and communications industry in a global effort to challenge negative gender and other stereotypes in advertising. Growth over the last year has seen members now account for some half a trillion dollars a year in advertising spend. Influencing that spending is an immensely powerful and cost-effective way to contribute to our Strategic Plan outcome on changing social norms.

We are also determined to be at the heart of the UN system, modeling the spirit of UN reform in everything we do. In this regard, I am happy to share with you that I have been in dialogue with the UN Development Cooperation Office (DCO). We will develop a joint DCO/ UN Women proposal on gender capacity in the countries and UN Country Teams in which UN Women is not present, something I know many of you have been concerned with and have asked us about. Together with DCO we will provide an informal briefing on our progress around the first Regular Session of our Executive Board in 2023 and we look forward to discussing this further then.

Our third priority has been ensuring that UN Women is fit for purpose as an organization.

We have started this Strategic Plan period in relatively robust financial health. It is something I have appreciated as a legacy of my predecessor. We will hear more about this in the agenda item on the Structured Dialogue on Financing. While the picture is positive, there remain ways in which we can do better. I of course want to see more resources for our work because with more we can do more and there is undoubtedly more to do. I want to see the balance between our core and non-core resources move back towards 50/50 because that is appropriate for our mandate. And I would like to see more multi-year funding, in line with the Secretary-General's Funding Compact, because predictable funding allows us to be more effective and efficient.

Recent years have posed powerful exogenous threats to our income with the impacts on economies of our major donors and official development assistance (ODA) more generally of COVID and the war in Ukraine. While these impacts have not been insignificant, UN Women has seen many times more donors increase their support than decrease it. In fact, if it were not for the adverse effects of currency exchange, we would be expecting another record year for both regular and other resources this year. We remain grateful not only for the financial support, but also for the political support this reflects.

As some of you know first-hand, it has also been a priority for me to be UN Women's fundraiser-in-chief, a role I take seriously and enthusiastically. So far the donors I have been able to speak with directly have responded kindly to my requests for additional support. I look forward to meeting those I have not yet been able to and receiving the same generous responses.

Alongside our push for financial strength, we have prioritized organizational improvement.

I have been clear that I expect UN Women to model operational excellence, in line with, but also beyond the performance benchmarks in the Strategic Plan. We must live up to the trust you place in us by using all the resources you afford UN Women in the best possible service of results for women and girls.

You will be aware of the operational reports I commissioned when I arrived, including the financial review that we will share with you soon together with our response to it. These are shaping the changes you will see in the coming year or so.

With regard to the financial review, I have always sought clarity on the financial situation when taking up a new role and this role is no different. The review was commissioned in order to offer recommendations on how we can ensure both better oversight and better and more strategic budgetary management. As you know, UN Women's Independent Audit and Evaluation Section (IAES) is undertaking an internal audit of our budgetary processes. I have asked that this is expedited and we will ensure that we have a discussion in due course on its findings.

The financial review confirmed the strong financial situation of UN Women in line with our 11 years of continuous unqualified audit opinions. At the same time it identified areas for us to do better, including integration and coherence between the planning, budgetary and financial processes, something our new enterprise resource planning (ERP) must deliver.

The review highlighted a high cash balance and while I appreciate the reasons for it, including prudent concerns about the impacts of COVID and more recently the war in Ukraine on our revenue, I have instructed that it be reduced with an emphasis on doing so through increased investment for the field.

The review also notes that, as with the rest of the UN Development System, non-core growth has outstripped core leading to a less than ideal core/ non-core ratio for our budget. This requires us to find solutions including proper direct project costing to ensure that the core does not subsidize non-core. We will share the findings and our management action plan to you as a package immediately after the UN General Assembly. I look forward to our discussions then and your guidance.

Moving to our oversight, I welcomed your suggestion for an assessment of our oversight function by UN Women's Independent Audit and Evaluation Section. As you will hear during the briefing, the assessment found that UN Women's internal audit and investigation functions enjoy functional and operational independence. This is of the highest importance to me. I have also instructed my team to present proposals for my consideration to ensure that sufficient and sustainable resources are available so that IEAS can fulfil its investigation support role and conduct proactive integrity and counter-fraud work.

We are increasing our focus on the results UN Women can deliver for women and girls at the country level where discrimination impacts their lives. I have referred to this as a "pivot to the field". In this regard, and as part of our follow-up to the financial review I commissioned upon taking office, I have instructed that no less than two-thirds of resources from unspent balances should be directed to

strengthening capacity for the field. This makes a financial reality of this priority without which I believe any claim to have pivoted to the field would be hollow.

Another part of holding ourselves to the highest standards is ensuring transparency. To that end I am pleased to share that our new Transparency Portal goes live soon. I recommend it to you all. We have developed this in alignment with our UN partners while also, we believe, pushing the envelope a little and playing our part in continuous improvement in these products across the system. We look forward to your reactions and feedback.

This commitment to transparency and openness extends also to our relationship with civil society, a crucial group of stakeholders that I consider essential to our collective success. They are key partners in all aspects of our work. They are at the heart of implementation of our programmes, provide crucial expertise on policy issues, advocate alongside us as they advocated for our establishment, and serve as a critical friend. This is indeed the best sort of friend to have alongside us in the face of the challenges to which we must effectively respond. While we are governed by Member States, the views and guidance of civil society and the women's movement, in all its diversity and richness, are at the heart of our work as well.

Organizational improvement must be continuous, and we will always welcome your pressing us to do better. We do not have resources, financial or otherwise, to waste, and I will continue to pursue any avenue that improves our efficiency and effectiveness.

In conclusion, these priorities and the distance we have been able to travel on them respond to what I have heard from you, the UN Women Executive Board. They also reflect what I heard as I began my term actively listening to all UN Women's stakeholders.

UN Women must be relevant to the world women and girls live in, achieve results primarily through and with partners, and use its limited resources to maximum effect. If we can do that then I am confident we will live up to our crucial and urgent mandate.

The distance to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 is long and time is short. And so is that to achieving Agenda 2030. Our challenges are shared ones. We have made significant progress this year but there is so much more to do. The blueprint is here. We have the Sustainable Development Goals and the Decade for Action. We have the promise of Our Common Agenda to reimagine collective action through the United Nations. UN Women remains at the heart of these efforts.

I have inherited a powerful institution, but we have the capacity to do much more. The capacity to offer more in crisis where the needs are urgent. The capacity to more effectively support Member States and other crucial actors to make their collective work for gender equality more impactful. The capacity to become a stronger, more effective and efficient organization that squeezes even more from the resources entrusted to it. And we can and must do all this from our proper place at the heart of the UN System, demonstrating something that I believe is true for all aspects of the Organization's work: that when the United Nations family works in concert we remain the best hope for peace, development and human rights.

I know I can count on your support to help UN Women grow stronger and to work with us as you have always done. I very much look forward to that.

I thank you.

