

**Opening Statement of UN Women Executive Director Sima Bahous to the First Regular Session of the Executive Board 13-14 February 2023**

*Rising to the challenges of 2023 for women and girls*

[As delivered]

My thanks and congratulations to H.E. Mr. Sergiy Kyslytsya, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Ukraine for assuming the Presidency for 2023. I would like also to acknowledge again Ambassador Abdul Muhith of Bangladesh who so ably led our work last year. Thank you, Mr Ambassador. I also welcome our new Vice Presidents: H.E. Ms. Leonor Zalabata Torres, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Colombia; H.E. Mr. Maurizio Massari, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Italy; H.E. Mr. Suriya Chindawongse, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Thailand; as well as Ms. Nelly Banaken Elel, First Counsellor at the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Cameroon. We look forward to your tenure.

Let us pause for a moment of collective condolences for the tens of thousands of lives lost and the many more injured in the earthquakes in southern Türkiye and northern Syria. UN Women is contributing to the response with and through the UN System, including through dedicated gender expertise.

Everywhere, crises continue to exact their highest toll on women and girls. In fact, 2023 looks set to be one of the most challenging since UN Women's establishment. COVID and its longer-term impacts are not behind us. The food and energy crisis fueled by the war in Ukraine continues to impact those furthest left behind the most and threaten global security and sustainable development. Climate change, and in particular climate-driven disasters, still demand a gender lens in adapting and mitigating impacts.

Nowhere is the impact of crises on women more acute than in Afghanistan. As you know, just last month, the Deputy Secretary-General and I were on a joint mission to Afghanistan. We went to show our solidarity with Afghan women and girls whom we met in Kabul and Herat, and to see for ourselves what it means to be a woman and a girl in a situation where every right we understand to be inherent to gender equality is questioned. We also met with Afghan women, before we travelled, in Ankara and in Islamabad. We heard their voices, and we brought their asks to the *de facto* authorities.

At a time when their voices are increasingly being silenced, we will continue to raise them in every platform we can – and to use our convening privilege to safeguard space for Afghan women's voices to be heard. We have demonstrated this commitment-in-action through the establishment of the Afghan Women's Advisory Group, paving the way for Afghan women across the country to shape the UN's humanitarian response plans.

We also sought, as is our responsibility, to build the commitment and alignment of regional players, neighbouring countries, and stakeholders to reversing the various edicts and bans that have done so much harm to the women and girls of Afghanistan since August 2021. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Member States play a crucial role in leading this alignment, and I am made hopeful by their own recent statements in support of Afghan women, and our joint work ahead, including an upcoming conference on women's rights in OIC Member States. In this way we presented a unified voice to the *de facto* authorities in Kabul and Kandahar in a powerful call for change.

I was also able to spend time with UN Women's inspiring team in Kabul and in Herat. They are the ones that have made a reality of our promise to stay in Afghanistan and deliver. We should all be as proud of them as we are appreciative.

We are not naïve. I left our many meetings in Kabul, Kandahar and Herat under no illusions. As UN Women's recent Afghanistan [Gender Alert](#), 'Out of jobs, into poverty', showed us, recent actions such as the ban on women working in aspects of humanitarian assistance have been crushing. They threaten millions of lives as well as livelihoods.

I fear for the people I met as winter progresses. That is why we continue to work, as my colleague the Emergency Relief Coordinator Mr. Martin Griffiths has done and our friends in UNAMA do every day - to engage, to pressure, to persuade and to pursue progress, however gradual, because there is no alternative. Equally, we continue to pay salaries to our female partners. We will not replace women with men - we cannot do that.

I remain committed to ensuring that everything we do, in every aspect of our mandate, has a close and explicit link to results for women and girls on the ground, what we call internally a "pivot to the field".

UN Women must be ready to make its contribution in the normative, coordination and operational spheres in every context and must step up its capacity and commitment to do so. This is why we have invested increasing resources and attention in Ukraine, from strengthening our office through surge capacity that has supported the efforts of the broader system, including through evidence and data to inform the humanitarian response. We are bringing our proven LEAP programme model, with its emphasis on practical measures for women's empowerment and resilience, to yet another situation where it is very much needed. My visit to Moldova last year contributed to sharpen our efforts to support Ukrainian refugees, and those displaced internally.

Our contribution matters no less in our cooperation across very different contexts, such as in Tanzania. During my recent mission there, I saw first-hand the results of our joint programme with IFAD, FAO and the WFP that supports rural women and girls to drive positive change for their communities through climate-smart agriculture, enabling women to secure income for their families and break cycles of intergenerational poverty. This work reflects a core principle of our Strategic Plan, to deliver greater results at scale through the influence of others.

I am proud to say that we have increasingly stepped up our delivery of results through Joint Programmes across the UN System, with 31 per cent of our 2021 expenditure being achieved via Joint Programmes, up from 13 per cent in 2018.

In Tanzania I saw young women leading on critical challenges such as HIV and AIDS, reminding us again of their crucial role as the face of the future - and the present - across the continent and beyond.

I was equally inspired to see how the Government has leveraged Generation Equality at the national level. I look forward to working with the Government of Tanzania under the leadership of President Samia Suluhu Hassan to co-host a Midpoint Moment for Generation Equality that highlights accountability for results, generates new additional commitments particularly in areas that have seen less attention, and re-energizes us across the world in our efforts.

The struggle for gender equality is a reality for women everywhere. SDG 5 is off track. That means the 2030 Agenda is off track since the SDGs cannot be achieved without gender equality.

You will have seen our estimate that equality on the current trajectory is 300 years away. Our collective work here in this Board is a rejection of that, a refusal to accept the betrayal of generation after generation of girls who are asked to accept that they have been born into an unequal world because of our failures.

Last November, the annual 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign highlighted yet another example. It focused global attention on the price paid by women human rights activists for standing up against violations of human rights. Members of this Executive Board who recently visited Ecuador heard directly of the scourge of femicide, as documented in our global report on the subject.

At this session we will look in depth at UN Women's operational response in Asia and the Pacific, paying particular attention to other issues, such as the profound gender-related implications of the climate crisis as well as non-traditional security risks such as cyber security and violent extremism. The challenges we face are both old and new. They evolve and we must evolve with them too.

We look forward to the Commission on the Status of Women at its 67<sup>th</sup> session (CSW67) next month and its priority theme "Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls". Digitalization is among the major shifts that are rapidly transforming society, allowing for unprecedented advances to improve social, economic and political outcomes for women and girls.

However, it is also giving rise to profound new challenges that may perpetuate and deepen existing patterns of gender inequalities. CSW67 is an opportunity to collectively chart a path to ensuring that women and girls enjoy the fullest share of the dividends of our digital present and future. As always, UN Women will be there to support Member States in the pursuit of the most powerful and progressive agreed conclusions as a normative framework that can influence the UN Global Digital Compact and will transform the lives of women and girls on the ground.

I have said before that UN Women recognizes its obligation to achieve the greatest possible impact with the resources you entrust to us. Our mandate demands the most effective governance, operational readiness, financial and human resources management and more.

You are aware of the priority I place on this, and the way in which I believe transparency to be at the heart of accountability, and accountability to be at the heart of performance. I continue to take steps to focus our resources, both human and financial, where they are most needed.

The UN Secretary-General, in his statement on the priorities of the organization for 2023 stressed that gender equality is central. He reiterated that he has commissioned an independent review of the UN system's capacity to deliver on gender equality across all pillars of the organization. UN Women has contributed to this review through interviews and has welcomed the efforts made by the independent review team. The Review Report is now with the Secretary-General. We look forward to a strengthened UN that recognizes the uniqueness of UN Women's triple mandate and that continues to place women and girls at its very heart.

The agenda for this session includes attention to audit matters. I am pleased that we have received our eleventh consecutive "clean" audit opinion from the Board of Auditors on the financial statements. We are a young entity with limited resources, which has grown extremely quickly. Such financial clean bills of health should not be taken for granted. We certainly do not do so.

We have also provided updates on the implementation of the three specific decisions mandated for reporting at this session.

These are first, a report on the indicators and metric framework that will provide UN Women with information on progress achieved on addressing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment. This is in addition to the required annual certification on these matters and analytical update on work to address the underlying causes.

Second, an update on our upgraded ethics compliance structure and the Ethics Office established upon the request of this Executive Board. This brings us into line with our sister entities. There will now be annual reporting to the Board under a recurring standalone item for decision at the annual sessions, starting at the Annual Session.

In addition, as you know, we are working closely with the Bureau of the Executive Board, and the entire Executive Board membership, as well as horizontally with the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS and UNICEF, on setting up an independent assessment in 2023 of UN Women's Executive Board governance and oversight function. We look forward to hearing from the Executive Board on how Member States wish to proceed. I know that this is being followed up by the Presidents of the Executive Boards and all the Bureaus to ensure the effectiveness of oversight and governance functions. We are fully committed to this exercise.

In addition, the Deputy Secretary-General in her capacity as Chair of the UN Sustainable Development Group has written to the Presidents of the governing bodies of the Sustainable Development Group members, introducing a new proposed "checklist" accountability tool to assess the implementation of the repositioning of the United Nations development system. I look forward to engaging with you, Mr. President, and the entire Bureau, to discuss how UN Women's report to the Board aligns with that checklist.

These are all opportunities to strengthen our organization further. This will be a theme for 2023 as we advance the priorities I have shared with you before: increased transparency, strengthened coordination and an increased focus on our programme countries.

The challenges of 2022 asked more of us, but together we rose to them. I know we will do the same this year. We start 2023 as a stronger organization than ever before. I believe we will end it stronger too thanks to our shared energy, renewed resilience, continued efforts and the wisdom of our Board.

I thank you.