

Opening remarks by Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, at the Second Regular Session of the UN Women Executive Board

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2020 : a turning point with defining moves

[As delivered]

Thank you, Mr President. Good morning and good afternoon to all distinguished Delegates, and to all our guests and colleagues. I am very pleased to welcome you to the Second Regular Session of the UN-Women Executive Board, the last session of this most eventful year.

I begin by thanking you, Mr. President and the Bureau, for your steadfast support to UN Women's work and your collective achievements in this year's effective and interactive official Board sessions. I particularly thank you for the many ways in which you have ensured that the strategic nature of the Executive Board's deliberations and its oversight function has continued undisturbed in a time of turbulence. It has been truly collaborative in every way, with clear, aligned vision in these uncertain times. Mr. President, I would always choose you as my President when times are uncertain. Thank you for your stewardship.

Today, we marked the 10-year anniversary of the establishment of UN Women. I thank you very much for making that session memorable. It was an opportunity for us to express our gratitude for everything you have done for UN Women; to look forward to the next 10 years and renew our ambition, considering highlights of the progress made for women and girls in that decade. These successes are also your successes as partners, and the successes of civil society, of the UN System, and of the many other partners we have met along the way.

But, as we know, that progress is now at risk. The continuing inequalities faced by women and girls are made starker by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Cumulatively, these inequalities are disproportionately challenging for women and girls.

Along with UNDP, UN Women has been sounding alarm bells on projected sharp increases in extreme poverty and the need for pre-emptive action. We are seeking your support to pre-empt these dangers that we see. By 2021, for every 100 men aged 25 to 34 living in extreme poverty, there will be 118 women, a gap that is expected to increase to 121 women per 100 men by 2030. Can we pre-empt this situation? These are deeply alarming projections of a future we must do everything in our power to avert. Women count on our support, and on your support, to save the gains made and to fight for greater and irreversible achievements.

On 1 October, the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on Beijing +25 gives us this opportunity. I am calling on all Governments to be represented at the highest level, by your Heads of State and Government, so that you can signal the strongest possible leadership, with declarations of actions and commitments, including your support for civil society, so that all of us can work collaboratively to avert this scenario. I look to you, our Board Members, to mobilize your capitals accordingly to make this time a turning point with defining moves, just like it was in Beijing 25 years ago.

Distinguished delegates, it was on this day, the 15th of September in 1995, that the Fourth World Conference on Women concluded in Beijing, China, with the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Conference was from 4th September to 15th September 1995. Let us take heart from reflecting on how far we have come since 1995 and the many ways in which we have tried to advance gender equality. We have named the problems that we have, we have legislated on those problems, we have taken action, but the action still has not gone far enough.

This is an hour of great need, when we must not let women down but lend them our unstinting support. This is giving the next generation a much better chance. Let's reflect a moment on some of the major changes we have seen in the last 25 years.

In 1995, there was no single UN entity fully dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment. Now you have UN Women.

Back then, women drew attention to unpaid care work and called for parental leave to enable fathers to share family care work and reduce the burden of care on mothers. Many men – but not yet enough – now clearly see themselves as feminists and allies. Many governments and employers – but not yet enough – have taken the right steps for parental leave policies to create institutions and childcare facilities that would create jobs while they care for children.

Women have questioned unequal pay over the years. Now, we have seen several countries outlawing discrimination in pay, but no country has eliminated unequal pay. So we have formed partnerships such as the Equal Pay International Coalition (EPIC), with major partners and figures like our Brazilian Goodwill Ambassador Marta challenging sponsors to level up for women and challenging private and public sector institutions. Now, both the Brazilian Football Confederation and the English Football Association have announced equal pay for both of their men's and women's national teams. These are among the more unlikely partners to make progress, which means that many others can make progress as well.

Women also developed vocabulary to name things like 'affirmative action' and 'minority rights' and created women's institutions in societies—albeit poorly resourced—to facilitate and drive change. Civil society and the women's movement were key players in Beijing in 1995, and in bringing UN Women into existence. They remain fundamental partners in the work we do now and in future with Generation Equality. They have been the voice of women and they have been heard, and they have been resourceful, despite not being adequately resourced. They have proved to be resilient time and time again. The pandemic threatens to rob us of these major institutions that support poor people and women and girls. But we can together rescue them with generous help and make sure they continue to be primary actors as we forge ahead.

This is a view increasingly shared by the UN Secretary-General who holds annual Town Hall meetings with women's civil society. The most recent of these meetings was held on 31 August.

In the year 2000, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, the first in a series to drive an increase in the participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all United Nations peace and security efforts. Now, women have participated in peace processes in Colombia, Syria, Yemen and several other countries, with

women close to 30 per cent of the Constitutional Committee in Syria. But we still have much more to do.

In two decades, representation of women in parliaments has moved up to a global average of 25%, managerial positions to 23%, with women just 7.4% of Fortune 500 CEOs. Yes, progress – but it is not parity, and it is too slow. From 2020 to 2025 the gap has to be closed to prepare for the Agenda 2030 vision and a more inclusive and feminist UN after its 75 years of existence.

Twenty-five years ago, we already understood discrimination against women to be intensified by intersecting aspects like sexual orientation, ethnicity, age and disability. Now, the aspect of race has again fully re-surfaced. We are determined to play a role in making the UN fit for purpose on this issue.

At UN Women I am leading an active discussion on racism, as well as within the UN system leadership, following the call of the Secretary-General. We have committed ourselves to address real or perceived discrimination, and we have a plan to execute this. Within UN Women we are focused on bringing experts to address unconscious and conscious bias through sensitizing staff on the issue of racism. Managers have access to expert help to enable them to guide their teams. We are also addressing any racial discrimination in recruitments and promotions, aiming for better diversity in the workforce, with adequate representation of African and Afro-descendent people, and better distribution across regions and levels, especially at Headquarters, where about 60% of our workforce comes from one Regional group of Member States. I will need the support of the Board and all Member States to make these changes meaningful. I will need you to help with monitoring as well as to support the career progression of staff of all races from G staff to D-level staff. I am glad to report that, with a more deliberate focus on bringing in young people from all parts of the world and providing a stipend, it has been possible to increase representation of interns from developing countries to 61% of our intern population. I am also part of a team together with my Deputy Executive Directors on making sure that our programmatic work also reflects the integration that we are pushing forward.

I therefore ask the Board, with your leadership, Mr. President, to make sure that race and gender are one of the most visible intersectionalities of this moment. Together we must champion and sustain this initiative in all its aspects throughout the UN system, so that we strongly fight gender-based and race-based discrimination in tandem. And so we make sure that there isn't any danger for gender equality to be neglected as a result of fighting for the just cause of racial equality. The two, together with the many other injustices, must be fought together.

With your leadership, gender equality has been able to find its place in the spectrum of COVID-19 response. I am encouraged by how our teams have been able to step up, with your support, in the countries where we have been dealing with COVID-19. The pandemic has tightened the grip on our societies and their economies and we have worked to increase recognition of these phenomena. We are making sure that, in all our work, we address the issue of data, the issue of violence against women, and the issue of the socio-economic impacts of the pandemics.

And last of all, as we recall reasons to be positive: despite the violence that has been experienced in the midst of the pandemic, 146 Member States have responded positively to the Secretary-General's appeal for a global end to violence everywhere. In a world that has consistently normalized violence and rape, excused perpetrators, and blamed women, mass movements have

helped us to ensure that it's clear to society how all-encompassing and endemic this phenomenon is.

Sexual violence, online sexual harassment and harmful traditional practices are on the rise across the world with severe impact on marginalized women and girls, whose voices are not sufficiently heard. In dealing with this issue of sexual harassment as well as sexual exploitation and assault, we have provided support through the UN Trust Fund on Ending Violence Against Women, for example in Zimbabwe where we supported a small grassroots organization called Bethany. The resources provided enabled them to improve their online complaint mechanisms. With the grant they established four community-based Online Information Centers on sexual and gender-based violence. These are managed by young women, solar powered, and equipped with cellphones and internet connection. These then link Bethany with the communities, so they can provide information of sexual and gender-based violence prevalence despite movement restrictions and power interruptions. Bethany has told us that the funding has really enabled them to strengthen their community-based systems, policies and institutions to address sexual exploitation and abuse, and has given them a seat at the table. And at the national level they have also been able to be heard and to make contributions on issues of sexual harassment.

In partnership with the EU/UN Spotlight Initiative, the UN Trust Fund has allocated an additional US\$9 million to 44 civil society organizations in sub-Saharan Africa, with a primary focus on institutional strengthening, risk mitigation and survivor recovery in the context of the pandemic. Another call by the UN Trust Fund for proposals will go out on 29 September and I ask you all to support it and encourage civil society to avail themselves of this opportunity.

I now turn to UN Women's victim-centered approach to fight sexual harassment as well as sexual exploitation and abuse as part of our contribution to the system-wide efforts. Institutionally, we have reinforced existing mechanisms to address all possible challenges in this area. More broadly in the UN system, we have participated in country responses under the Resident Coordinators/Humanitarian Coordination, such as awareness raising and risk assessments; and joined UN-system-wide efforts such as development of country-specific guidance notes and centralized reporting of sexual exploitation and abuse allegations through an electronic real-time tool. Our Human Resources team has been able to uphold and all regular recruitment safeguards. And reporting and investigation services for sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment allegations, provided by the Office of Internal Oversight Services, have remained safe and accessible throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. And for that we are very thankful.

I also want to offer you a broader perspective on the response to this within the UN system, as there has been an assessment from 350 UN system gender focal points for the period 2014-2019 which revealed the doubling of engagement in measures to prevent sexual harassment in that time, including in the workplace. And indeed this is positive news. But it is not all good news, as you will read in the report that will be released on 1 October. While we have seen this significant uptake, and ending violence against women has been among the most prioritized areas by the UN system, engagement in this space has actually been declining over that period, with this trend projected to continue in the next five years (2020-2025). There again, our monitoring becomes important.

Violence against women and girls is an issue that the COVID-19 context has accelerated into an emergency for women and girls. In countries where we have seen an increase of violent incidents, we have also seen increased resources directed to women's shelters. We have also seen real time reporting on increased calls to helplines and the prioritization of these elements as essential services. We appreciate this, but we know that much more investment is needed to flatten the curve of gender-based violence.

We are building partnership and interagency coordination, for example through the [Inter-Agency statement on violence against women and girls in the context of COVID-19](#) that UN Women led. The Secretary-General is calling for this critical issue to gain new momentum, with accelerated concrete policy responses to gender-based violence and zero tolerance of these violations across all spheres of society, everywhere.

On 29 September, we will hold a high-level event on gender-based violence and COVID-19, which will build on the Secretary-General's appeals and activate the Action Coalition on this theme. The success of the event lies in both choice of action that can be taken and the investment needed to make it happen. UN Women is the UN agency leading this Generation Equality Action Coalition and we look forward to working with the Member States who have opted to be part of these coalitions.

Gender parity is important for taking us to Planet 50:50 by 2030, and the UN and governments' leadership is essential. Our system-wide mandate to lead and coordinate the UN's gender equality efforts has never been more important. This is the third anniversary of the Secretary-General's System-Wide Strategy on Gender Parity. Later this year, we will launch the Field-Specific Enabling Environment Guidelines, with recommendations on how to accelerate effective efforts to reach parity at field-level. We have also launched "civil society shadow reporting" on the overall parity strategy as a significant element to increase transparency and accountability.

We have made progress with UN Women's Country presences typologies. We have strengthened our influence, broadened our partnerships, and enhanced our impact to become a much stronger part of the UN institutions at country-level. We were born out of reform and aim to take that spirit forward, especially in the field, responding flexibly to changing circumstances, for example, as we have seen with COVID-19. We have augmented some of our field offices and our networks to support our work and we have used virtual decentralization to address urgent business needs. Our country presence establishment policy has now been finalized. The revisions will enable UN-Women to be present and staffed at the right level where we are most needed, within our available resources. The process for establishing and changing country presences and responding to Member State need for support is based on business cases. This is reviewed internally, submitted for finalization by myself and the senior team and guided by the limitations on resources. We now have a menu of support actions so that we can be sensitive to country partnerships. We have learnt in this process the importance of extended partnerships such as with cultural leaders, religious leaders, young people, because all of these are critical for strengthening our work at country-level and our work in UN Country Teams as we implement the reforms.

The ongoing development of our new Strategic Plan allows us to design even closer alignment with our UN counterparts, focusing on coordination and coherence with UN partners, including UNDP, UNFPA and UNICEF, especially at country level. The COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the importance of that coherent response. We have paid particular attention to three priorities: the response to the increased levels of violence against women and girls; ensuring that a gender equality focus is included in socio-economic stimulus packages, as well as in social protection programmes; and ensuring the availability of sex-disaggregated data.

We have been working across a range of influential partners to demonstrate the central role women can play in economic and social recovery, and to raise the alert on the dangers of failing to do so. We see this as a historic opportunity in the midst of the pandemic.

UN Women has been strongly advocating for national fiscal stimulus packages to take a gender lens in their design as well as working to influence the agenda of Financing for Development through key partners and constituencies like Finance Ministers and Multilateral Development Banks. We have hosted a series of high-level virtual Ministerial roundtables with the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank and the Asian Development Bank thus far to highlight best practices, share experiences, and build concrete partnerships to amplify the importance of addressing gender equality and women's empowerment in the multilateral system response. This can also be clearly seen in our work with the Multi-Partner Trust Funds, where we bring some of this information, and where UN Women has successfully advocated for the establishment of gender markers and financial targets, for example in the Secretary-General's COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund. This has borne fruit: 61% of the best proposals had gender equality as their principal objective – meeting and surpassing the 30% target for financial allocation. And the Peacebuilding Fund, the UN Partnership to Promote the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the Joint SDG Fund have all made clear commitments to gender-responsive programming.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, we know that very little happens without money. It is vital that UN Women is strong and well funded. There has been some progress in the funding but we continue to seek your support to meet the Integrated Budget 2020-2021 revenue projections for the full implementation of the Strategic Plan. I look forward to our structured dialogue on financing at this session. Last year, our revenue reached a record US\$527.4 million. However, the share of Regular Resources to Other Resources declined markedly, from 44 per cent in 2015 to 28.5 per cent in 2019. In 2020, non-core revenue has already reached 95 per cent of our target. This is largely a result of generous contributions from the European Commission and the EU/UN Spotlight Initiative to end violence against women. However, we are likely to see a deficit in the target for Regular Resources of over US\$50 million in 2020.

In line with the Funding Compact, we encourage Member States to channel more contributions toward Regular Resources and provide more flexible and predictable other-resources revenue. We appreciate partners for making payments earlier this year and for additional support that has enabled a fast response to COVID-19. That was irreplaceable. I acknowledge the Governments of Finland, Germany, France, Denmark and Luxembourg for their increase to Regular Resources

and would like to encourage those that have not yet made Regular Resource contributions this year to do so.

We also are making progress on Generation Equality, and I thank France and Mexico for remaining committed to this initiative. The Forum has been postponed to the first half of 2021 due to COVID-19 and reshaped to address the pandemic's impact with a responsive regional footprint that integrates our COVID-19 activities and broadens our stakeholder engagement. This centralizes the voices and agency of young people in the decision-making processes, design and implementation. The Beijing+25 Youth Task Force will increase its membership to 40 representatives and take up seats this month in the main decision-making body of the Forum.

As well as attending the 29 September event on Gender-based violence, please support the 'Women Leaders for Generation Equality' event this Thursday, organized by Mexico and UN Women together with the Council of Women World Leaders. These are both issues that were critical in Beijing and remain unfinished significant business for the Action Coalitions to take forward. We thank the 77 stakeholders from governments, youth-led organizations, civil society, international organizations, that have already committed to Generation Equality. Later this year, all stakeholders will be asked to join the Coalitions so that they can also make their own commitment.

I have mentioned the big anniversaries that we are commemorating this year: the United Nations at 75 years and the 5-year anniversary of the 2030 Agenda, join our UN Women at 10, 20 years of Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women Peace and Security, and of course the 25 years since Beijing. These milestones together must be game-changing for women and girls. It does depend on us, together.

Thank you.