

***Opening remarks by Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and  
UN-Women Executive Director, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka***

***UN-Women Executive Board, First Regular Session 2021  
16 February 2021  
[As delivered]***

Thank you, Mr. President, Excellencies. I would also like to greet the Executive Director of UNAIDS and welcome her to this Executive Board Meeting. Mr. President, let me start by expressing my condolences to all who have lost friends and family through the continuing COVID-19 pandemic. Our world is in grief. The pandemic has deepened food insecurity, increased the number of orphans and child-headed households, and lockdowns have resulted in more abuse of women and girls. There is also a looming debt crisis and displacement of women from the labour market. There is a threat of going back to the era when it was assumed ‘a women’s place is at home’. We face a troubled and turbulent world. Right now, our thoughts go to all those facing difficulties in countries such as Haiti, Myanmar and Yemen. We wish them peace, security and protection of their human rights. This is also a time for solidarity, as we fight against the pandemic and for equitably shared vaccines.

I am pleased to join you for the First Regular Session of the UN Women Executive Board 2021. I congratulate and warmly welcome our brand-new President, H.E. Mr. Alie Kabba, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Republic of Sierra Leone. I applaud the leadership and commitment already shown by the President in this short time.

I also extend a warm welcome and appreciation to the Vice-Presidents: H.E. María del Carmen Squeff, Permanent Representative of Argentina, H.E. Mr. Günter Sautter, Deputy Permanent Representative of Germany, H.E. Mr. Kimura Tetsuya, Ambassador to the Mission of Japan, and Ms. Eka Kipiani, Counsellor from the Mission of Georgia. We look forward to engaging with you in this important year of building back better, which means building back green, equitable, gender-responsive and inclusive. I take this opportunity also to thank once again the outgoing President, Mr. Jukka Salovaara, Permanent Representative of Finland, and the entire 2020 Bureau for their impressive leadership and gender equality activism.

The gains in gender equality made since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action have been under almost universal pressure, especially last year, whether in education, health, income generation, representation of women or safety and security. Regressions in gender equality threaten the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and need a dedicated, bold effort that builds on our breakthroughs, our shortcomings and lessons learnt.

COVID-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities across all aspects of life for women, girls and their communities. The impact of lost education for children, especially girls, is likely to have permanent effects for many. Our engagements with civil society, faith-based organizations and traditional leaders have been about community-driven efforts to stop losing a

generation. Traditional leaders that we have partnered with in Africa are promulgating bylaws to further criminalize harmful practices, highlighting the importance of collaborating at community level.

We are playing a part in policy advice in every corner of the world, and across the UN system where we are providing gender-sensitive advice. And we are working together with our many external partners. For example, in Timor Leste we are giving technical assistance to government; in Viet Nam we are supporting government efforts to safeguard women in quarantine; and in Jordan and Bangladesh we are ensuring integration of gender responsive planning and preparedness for COVID-19. We have been the leading agency in shaping national action plans for women, peace and security that also respond to the pandemic. We are driving for sex-disaggregated data and evidence, bringing key issues like violence against women and girls right to the highest levels of the agenda. We have invested in more than 100 rapid gender assessments focused on the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 and thereby helped shape the UN Country Teams Socio-Economic Response Plans.

We are also amplifying information on the unfolding catastrophic impact globally of the pandemic on women's livelihoods, as most of the jobs being lost are women's jobs. As Vice-President Harris of the USA has recently said: 'The mass exodus of women from the workforce is a national emergency, and it demands a national solution'. Indeed, it is also a global emergency and it needs all of us to act.

We have supported efforts in more than 60 countries and regional offices to enhance social protection and to promote economic resilience and shared responsibilities in the context of care. Across all regions, we have supported women-owned businesses through business skills development, online services, and access to publicly funded cash grants under national COVID-19 recovery measures. In Lebanon, 140,000 female-headed households received cash assistance provided under the Emergency National Poverty Targeting Programme, where we assisted the Government to deliver this much needed intervention. In El Salvador and in Morocco we have engaged with men and boys on sharing the burden of care, and we have influenced the provision of infrastructure that will relieve women of the burden of care.

However, even with all our work, nationally, globally, the response by UN Women and many of us is still not adequate. Our Global COVID-19 Gender Response Tracker shows that 42 countries have no gender-sensitive measures at all in response to COVID-19. We of course are engaging those countries. Over ten trillion dollars has been poured into fiscal and monetary packages. Yet only 15 per cent of the support measures introduced cover violence against women and girls, support unpaid care, and strengthen women's economic security in ways that will overall entrench gender responsiveness and equity. We need to intervene in this situation.

We have continued to call for an ambitious scaled up response, given the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and girls. According to ILO, reserve banks, International Financial Institutions and governments, women are bearing the brunt of the economic fallout. Despite this reality, support for women is still somewhat limited. We have been calling for a

better targeted response and delivery of services. But I might also add, that although there are a number of governments who are heeding the call and who are making the effort, we are not managing to cover all women.

UN Women has also been engaging with International Financial Institutions as they are key role players in fiscal stimulation. Our ongoing work includes prospective work with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development on the nexus of green finance and gender. This can bring a gender lens to COVID-19 economic recovery plans building on EBRD's pioneering work on green finance.

Excellencies, we call on you, as shareholders in International Financial Institutions, to ensure that the fiscal stimulus packages that are addressing this emergency are also targeted to and designed for women. We need you to help us bolster our case on gender responsive recovery.

Similarly, recovery efforts must encompass both short- and long-term action on the 'Shadow Pandemic' of violence against women and girls – an issue on which UN Women has led and informed the shaping of national policy and response plans across all regions. Sixty-eight UN Women offices have provided support to Member States to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls.

The pandemic has also exacerbated gaps in women's participation in decision-making. An analysis of COVID-19 task forces from 87 countries found that only 3.5 per cent of them had gender parity. Since the early days of the pandemic last year we have been working to bring women's informed voices to the national and regional response, using mechanisms such as the African Women Leaders Network, and strengthening political action for gender-responsive plans and budgets. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a gender analysis of the federal budget led to a re-balancing in the COVID-19 context and enabled MPs to request specific resource allocations for women entrepreneurs and to avoid budget cuts to social support provisions for families.

As we look ahead to emerging from the crisis, aspects like parity in political representation take on increased urgency. Women's leadership and increased participation in decision making will be a cornerstone to sustain democratic values and enhance crisis management. We need bold and ambitious change here. The pandemic must not in any way hinder the bold action needed for addressing gender equality. Action is needed right now. The pandemic should not be a deterrent for gender equality and for all types of women's participation.

The upcoming session next month of the Commission on the Status of Women is an opportunity to make bold decisions on women's participation. The pandemic makes this even more urgent. Both International Women's Day and the Commission on the Status of Women will focus on women's leadership. The priority theme recognizes how women and men can collectively solve the urgent challenges of our time through fast tracked, equal power-sharing in public life. CSW is your platform to show our ambition to address the lost ground. It is an

unmissable opportunity in 2021 that we cannot let go. We need to rise to the occasion. I hope we will witness strong political will, expressed through ambitious and bold Agreed Conclusions that will strengthen the global normative framework and send a message to the whole world. We count on you to include civil society in your delegations to this virtual session.

In this moment we need to advocate for all women, in all their diversity, including those women who are facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, and young women, who must participate equally in decision-making at the highest levels.

An important aspect of our work is the fight for a more equal future by ensuring racial justice. Inside UN Women and across the UN system we have embarked vigorously on this work. In UN Women we have appointed an official to drive the change and address racial inequality and bias in our midst. All our divisions have been asked to address perception and real racism concerns in their teams.

I request the Executive Board to help us to fight racism wherever it exists and everywhere in the UN, including UN Women. We need to make sure that you pronounce clearly that this is also your priority.

On the implementation of General Assembly resolution 72/279 on the repositioning of the United Nations Development System and 2020 Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review of Operational Activities for Development of the United Nations system (QCPR), we recognize that the issues at hand are much greater than UN Women's capacity. We know we must entrench the work on gender equality in the UN System at the scale that is needed. We welcome the QCPR, which has emphasized gender mainstreaming, which has provided excellent language for collaboration between agencies, and has enabled us to work with persons with disabilities and youth participation, as well as in UN Country Teams.

Our Strategic Plan is unfolding. We aim to cast our net wider to make sure that we have partners to complement our Strategic Plan for 2022-2025. This can only succeed if we act together with diverse stakeholders. We need support for a Strategic Plan that is rights-based and bold on bringing about change and protecting our gains. A Plan that is entrenching our coordination and our normative mandate and is selective and strategic on operations.

We look forward to our consultations so that we can hear your voices and reflect them in the Strategic Plan. That is why we also see Generation Equality as an important platform to extend participation and support for our Strategic Plan. The success of our Strategic Plan cannot just depend on the efforts of UN Women, but must draw in support from across the field from our partners and across the world. It is an important tool. It is also important in making sure that the UN works together. We have ensured that we have a shared common vision with the other UN agencies, which takes forward the work of addressing the issues raised in the 25 year review of the Beijing Platform for Action as well as advancing the implementation of the Decade of Action.

This past year has been a strong validation and demonstration of our coordination work on a system-wide response and through repositioning processes. For example, it is evidenced that it was the strong coordination focus that has ensured that the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19 and the recovery response reflected the needs of women. The COVID-19 Response and Recovery Multi-Partner Trust Fund also reflected the needs of women significantly.

Generation Equality will build on these successes. This vision of greatly increased alignment around the work on gender equality is one into which we believe the Generation Equality Forum and the Action Coalitions will make an important contribution, in line with our mandate. The Generation Equality players will be able to reach where we cannot reach and where women and girls need us. They will expand our resource base which is currently not proportional to the needs of women. Generation Equality will help us with fulfilling some of the promises that have not been fulfilled since we made them in Beijing. It will respond also to the needs that have now been created by the pandemic and accelerate the achievement of the SDGs in the Decade of Action.

The co-leadership, co-ownership and thought leadership that is present in Generation Equality will ensure that we achieve multilateral activity that is inclusive of all ages. That includes private sector and young people, that includes men and boys and that includes many people in our communities who are part of civil society both at community as well as international level.

We have successfully brought in young people around the world. Youth involvement in the discourse has brought over 50 million people to involvement in Generation Equality Forum preparations, consultations and events. This includes the activation of the Leaders for Generation Equality, an intergenerational network of over 200 women leaders from across the world.

The leadership of Generation Equality has 24 Governments that have already joined. I would like you to support this as part of the work that we are doing in the Strategic Plan, as well as the work that you are guiding us to do as this Board.

As regards our funding, I have mentioned the importance of new funding, which we are trying to generate also through Generation Equality. I must stress that two of the three aspects of our mandate – coordination and normative elements – remain relatively underfunded within an overall positive picture and we will pay attention to this. These aspects are hard to fundraise for outside the Member States.

We have an overall encouraging financial picture as we begin 2021, and I thank you for your generous support. Preliminary figures indicate that UN Women will reach its highest Total Contributions Revenue of around US\$ 544 million for 2020, exceeding 2019's high of \$510.5 million. This is a significant achievement. I thank all our donors for their steadfast, and increased

support that recognizes the needs of women and girls in the context of the competing COVID-19 drain on resources.

Regular resources (core) have reached an all-time record for UN Women with preliminary figures around \$US165 million, a 15% increase over 2019 although still below the Integrated Budget projection of \$200 million. We appreciate all those who made Regular Resource payments early in 2020 and recognize the increases from the Governments of Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, Sweden and USA. I remain watchful over the continuing lack of balance between core and non-core resources, which influences our ability to deliver high quality and timely support. The share of core contributions compared to non-core is still about 30%.

Let me also thank the European Union for the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative support, which boosted our total resources with over \$70 million received in 2020. The work that we are doing with Spotlight is continuing to make significant contributions in the many countries where we implement this initiative.

I would also like to thank the Government of Ireland for hosting the second annual partner roundtable last month. The opportunity to build consensus around support and the overall strategic priorities, including work with the International Financial Institutions, has been invaluable. We remain hopeful that you will help us to receive and build more cooperation among these institutions.

Distinguished delegates, you will have seen my year-end management letter to the Secretary-General that has been shared with all Member States in which I certify the reporting of all allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse that have been brought to our attention in 2020 and the taking of all appropriate measures.

We are not complacent on this issue. Prevention and response to sexual harassment is one of the areas in which we strongly collaborate throughout the UN System.

In conclusion, Mr. President. We recently learnt of the passing of one of our 'Founding mothers' of UN Women, Margaret Snyder, affectionately known as Peg. She would be proud of the spirit and the ethos that endures as part of her legacy. We salute her and her pioneering spirit and are thankful to stand on her shoulders. I have great pride in the dedicated personnel of UN Women. These are the people who confront the problems of the pandemic faced by women and girls every day. Many have had to manage work and increased responsibilities at home in a time of social isolation. We thank them for their dedication. We offer maximum flexibility so that they can also manage their 'work-life' balance.

We look forward to working with you to build back better, and to ensure that building back better is green, is equitable, is gender-responsive and is inclusive.

Thank you, Mr. President.