

**Opening statement by Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, at the UN Women Executive Board, Annual Session 2021**

21 June 2021

[As delivered]

***Looking back to look forward***

Good morning, distinguished Delegates, guests and colleagues. Welcome to the Annual Session of the UN Women Executive Board 2021. I begin with thanks to the President of the Executive Board, Mr Alie Kabba. I have appreciated your support throughout this year, and your unwavering commitment to the organization and I also would like to thank the Members of the Bureau for their support. I know we can count on you to safeguard the agenda as champions, advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls wherever you are, now and in the future. I also thank the Executive Board overall for all the work you do and the interactions that we have had with this Executive Board in the last eight years.

In reviewing UN Women's work in the past years, I start with the COVID-19 response. Let me first express our solidarity with the countries who are still struggling with the pandemic and, our solidarity with India, where we have lost many people. We continue also to express our solidarity with the people in Africa where WHO reports a full battle with the third wave. We urge for vaccines to be accessible by all countries. We are also calling on all nations to direct their fiscal response packages and government stimulus packages to support women who continue to struggle, whether through services that will support them as survivors of domestic violence, or support to entrepreneurs, formal and informal traders and cooperatives with cash transfers, grants and subsidized credits to arrest and reverse the descent into poverty. This is particularly important because in many countries women are not yet benefitting sufficiently from government support. This is one of the jobs I leave with my colleagues and with my successor to continue.

The decrease of women in the labour market will make the pandemic last in the lives of women for many generations to come. To avoid this, debt relief, greater financing, and increased levels of official development aid will be important in preventing a major regression in gender equality caused by COVID-19.

Women universally need alternatives for caregiving. Younger women below 30 and women who are of child-raising age are the most at risk of loss of income and livelihood because they have to look after their children. We need laws and policy reforms in this regard, in the public and private sectors, that address this and ensure that children, old people, people with disability and others are not left unattended.

The related loss of girls' education as well as harmful cultural practices that restrict access to learning must not be allowed to continue, because we cannot have another lost generation. Girls must go back to school, across all ages, and we must work urgently to ensure universal digital literacy. These initiatives are part of our actions through Generation Equality and integral to UN Women's new Strategic Plan.

The Global COVID-19 Gender Response Tracker launched last year has been a critical asset for recognition of these acute vulnerabilities and for stimulating response. The tracker now covers 219 countries and territories. That data shows us the reality in almost all countries. For example, there has been a strong emphasis in national responses on preventing and/or responding to violence against women and girls. However, response to the economic fall-out remains largely gender blind. I therefore ask for your active support in this area of economic recovery.

The COVID crisis has not been the only one to address. Since 2018, through our joint work, 365 million people in 42 countries have benefitted from disaster risk reduction policies, plans and strategies.

Distinguished delegates, a critical part of our mandate has been normative work. Together with you, we have been able to make major inroads on ending discriminatory laws. In the last 10 years, 89 countries have stronger legal protection through over 700 legal reforms, half of which removed discriminatory provisions towards against women. 75 countries, home to 2.6 billion women and girls now have a stronger legal, regulatory and policy environment on women's economic empowerment. 96 countries have strengthened legal and policy frameworks to prevent and respond to violence against women. Work with both the police and judiciary is underpinning the ability of women to benefit from these changes. We supported national police forces in over 80 countries worldwide to make them more survivor-centred, trauma-informed and perpetrator-focused. I want to thank the countries that have come forward and have committed themselves to this work. 95 countries or territories have adopted National Action Plans on women, peace and security. The work I leave for those who remain is to make sure that these Action Plans work significantly for women and girls in every corner of the world.

These are dramatic and wide-ranging policy and legal reforms that we have worked very hard to bring forward and we want to make sure that they deliver for women and girls. Though poorly funded these are signature elements for us. I leave you with you momentum in this area which you can continue.

Distinguished delegates, as we look back over the last eight years, there are further areas of work and achievement that signal important directions for the years ahead. In all of these areas of work, we have worked closely with you and civil society, without whom we could not have moved as far as we have. We have gained vitality and strength that would not have existed without the work of civil society and I take this moment to thank them and to appreciate the

sisterhood that we have enjoyed in the work with them. I want to thank them for standing with us, even when we have been at a very low point and being there to lift us.

Initially with Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, we raised the tempo on ending gender-based violence and we continue this vital work with Secretary-General Guterres. All over the world people have responded. The 16 Days of Activism to End Violence Against Women and Girls has turned the globe orange, although we have not yet covered every country.

We know from the Corporate Evaluation of UN-Women's convening role in ending violence against women that our COVID-19 response strongly illustrated the power of a coordinated UN system. It also illustrated the value of our extensive policy work and our advocacy support, such as had global impact in our 'Shadow Pandemic' campaign.

We have also issued the first ever UN Prevention Framework on Violence against women and girls; the first ever Essential Services Package for women and girls subject to violence; and The Gender Responsive Policing Handbook, which has been adopted by many countries.

The #MeToo movement has propelled the jurisprudence for gender-based violence and made it possible for many of the countries to bring big men down. Thank you for this work that you have done.

Our Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces programme with a new Global Package of Tools is now operating in 53 cities in 32 countries.

In 2020 we led an interagency working group of eight United Nations entities that resulted in unprecedented mobilization of multiple stakeholders on violence against women. Financing at scale, including through the Spotlight Initiative, has now taken this work to a much higher level and it has brought connections with thousands of civil society organizations from everywhere in the world.

Coordination has been important in this work. UN Women is one of the entities with the highest proportion of joint programmes, with 66 per cent of UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks having gender-specific outcome results, up from 47 per cent in 2012.

All of this has been our increased coordination activity, which goes beyond the UN. This kind of Coordination remains at the heart of our ability to mobilize and maximize the combined resources of all our partnerships, including within the UN and outside the UN.

We value the 190 members of the UN Inter-agency Network of Women and Gender Equality (IANGWE), and the 400 gender focal points who are supporting us to do gender parity work. Through them we have seen more women occupying positions throughout the UN. Last year IANGWE's analysis for the Beijing +25 anniversary recommended urgent, sustained and coordinated action to safeguard gender equality gains, many of which we will be able to pursue

in our Strategic Plan. We will take this beyond the UN through Generation Equality to reach many more people.

We continue to focus on leading the “gender theme groups” at the country level, harmonizing joint UN Country Teams (UNCT) processes through the UNCT SWAP and tracking financial resources through the establishment of the gender equality marker.

Distinguished delegates, we have also pushed forward on women’s economic empowerment. The pandemic brought home the vital importance of solving women’s unpaid care burden. This work still has a long way to go, but we have started in a strong way to reduce and to redistribute the unpaid care work of women.

We brought this issue to public view in 2015 in our flagship *Progress of the World’s Women* “Transforming economies, realizing rights” and showed with new research and evidence how millions of women were limited by caregiving and trapped in low paid, poor quality jobs. Now we have a clear focus on the need for a true care economy for women to achieve economic justice, and a newly formed Global Alliance on Care with 20 countries to be formalized in Paris. The aim is to create up to 80 million decent care jobs to recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work and broaden support for ILO Convention 189 on Domestic Workers.

The jobs of the future must be greener and sustainable for women. Our climate-smart agriculture programme in 19 African countries has allowed women farmers to increase the value of their products up to 10 times. We hope to expand this programme, for example to the Sahel, where women face many challenges. The Network of Women Farmers in the North of Senegal helped to protect its 16,000 members during COVID-19, fighting poverty through agriculture and were the suppliers of rice to government and the people of Senegal.

The jobs of the future must be decent jobs that offer women safety and financial reward. The Women’s Empowerment Principles (WEPs) which started with just 200 signatory companies now has more than 5,000, benefitting over 10 million employees in 141 countries. That is still not enough, but it is progress, and my staff have worked very hard to nurture these companies.

Since 2010, the number of countries with gender balanced parliaments has more than tripled from 7 to 24. Although we want to reach 50 per cent balance for all, this is progress. The number of countries with severe women’s underrepresentation almost halved from 52 to 27.

Our work on capacity-building for women political candidates has resulted in more than 30,000 women trained each year with raised profile in their communities. We see acceptance of the use of quotas and special measures is gaining ground. For example, in the Commission on the Status of Women’s Agreed Conclusions this year you agreed for 50 per cent of women to be represented in all public institutions and we thank you for taking that step.

We are also working to increase women's leadership and influence of health policies. For example, in over 50 countries we are supporting women living with HIV to influence the HIV response.

In women, peace and security we have seen a significant increase in resources and institutional mechanisms. In 2010 just 19 countries had National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security. Now there are 95. Since 2012, the share of peace agreements with specific provisions for women and girls has marginally increased from 22 to 25 per cent. This is an area we have to push very hard on.

We have seen a nearly three-fold increase in the allocation of funding to UN peacebuilding projects promoting gender equality as a principal objective. The Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund now supports 357 women's organizations. The innovative Elsie Initiative Fund for Uniformed Women in Peace Operations is helping to boost the number of women participating in decisions and actions relating to their own security, and that of their communities.

Engaging youth in the decisions that affect their lives has been at the heart of our work. This applies also to the 1.8 billion young people between the ages of 10-24, nearly 90 per cent of whom live in developing countries.

We started with nurturing and supporting youth in our CSW, making sure that they participate actively. Young people are at the centre of our ambitions and we must put them where their influence can shape our future and co-create with us. For example, together with UNICEF, ITU, UNDP and the private sector, as well as philanthropic organizations, we are working to promote girls in ICT and STEM, breaking negative gender stereotypes in learning and training, and helping them access 21st century opportunities that make new economic pathways.

Our work on promoting and entrenching positive social norms takes on increased urgency in this context including the engagement with men, who are traditional leaders and who are leading faith-based organizations. These are men whose work has made waves in fighting against child marriage, returning girls back to school, ending FGM, ending violence against women, and changing the laws in the areas in which they have jurisdiction in order to protect women.

Other leaders include private sector influencers like the Unstereotype Alliance. We are making sure that we change the way in which women and men are projected in public across the world.

HeForShe's IMPACT Champions continue to demonstrate the vital role of men and boys and how they can play a critical role. We are encouraged that so many men are really coming forward and taking on this work in their own organizations.

Ending discrimination is at the centre of our work, including racial justice. We have been able to fight for LGBTIQ+ people, as well as for people with disabilities. We have been stressing the importance of bringing these special and significant groups to the forefront.

UN Women has its own Black Caucus, which has fought for people within the UN as well as beyond the UN. They have fought against racial prejudices and have made sure that we strive for diversity within our own organization. These are women and men who are fighting especially for women in the global south, and who have helped us to bring in young women from all over the world to be part of the UN. Similarly, they have fought against sexual exploitation of women, sexual harassment, and made sure that the changes that we see and want for women all over the world can also be seen in UN Women.

Our work on disability inclusion has been even more important during the pandemic, and in settings of conflict and post-conflict with support to 67 countries last year alone. We are also leading a Joint Programme to coordinate the UN System's disability inclusion response to COVID-19 in support of UNCTs, governments and civil society, to ensure a gender equality and intersectional perspective, with strong emphasis on partnerships.

Looking ahead, Generation Equality aims to fast-track and accelerate the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and of the Sustainable Development Goals, and to respond to the pandemic.

You have challenged us to diversify our sources of funding. Our resources have grown – from just US\$275 million in 2013, to our highest ever total revenue of US\$563.9 million in 2020. Generation Equality is a response to that, with the aim of raising funds so that the women's agenda is not just implemented by UN Women but also by other organizations.

We have therefore spent years mobilizing a whole ecosystem of partners committed to making the foundational changes that will accelerate implementation, in alignment with our new Strategic Plan. These plans are set finally to come to fruition next week, at the Generation Equality Forum in Paris. We thank the Government of France for having made this possible, just like the Government of Mexico.

There will be 54 governments committed to acceleration. We thank you for your radical impatience and we welcome also private sector and philanthropic organizations, youth, civil society and individuals who have come forward for Generation Equality.

The successful forum in Mexico was the first point where the magnitude of the new stakeholders emerged. They demonstrated the commitment and the intergenerational thirst that is there.

For example, Women Moving Millions announced US\$100 million for feminist movements and women leaders. The Canadian Government, Ford Foundation and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation also announced new support for civil society.

We thank our banner private sector partners like Microsoft, Gucci, Pay Pal, Koç, KERING, Clue, Accor, Salesforce, for being leaders in the multi-stakeholder Action Coalitions, and for being strongly supportive of and complementary to our intergovernmental and civil society partners.

Together they create the ecosystem that is taking us forward.

We have seen COVID-19 undermine and threaten the achievement of the SDGs. The Action Coalitions and the Women, Peace, Security and Humanitarian Action Compact constitute a global acceleration plan to increase progress over the next five years and counteract those negative forces. Along with the energy of youth who dare, they bring a reconfiguration of partnerships.

In our contemporary situation, democracies can be seen to be more vital than ever – but they can only be truly democratic if youth are also represented.

This time of crisis has highlighted the need to rouse all sectors of society to build a new, inclusive world through multilateralism that will build back better. In this regard the CSW has become an important place where we can bring together all these stakeholders to take us forward. The CSW cannot be a place where we *retain* the status of women. It has to be a place where we *raise* the status of women much higher. We cannot stall and diminish their status. We have lost some time, but CSW has adopted some excellent Agreed Conclusions that have propelled women forward.

As I end today, I am proud to have overseen an entity that has significantly increased its influence within the UN system, and expanded its partnerships and influence beyond the UN System. It is my hope that my successor will work ‘outside the box’ and will take this vision forward in even bigger and more adventurous ways.

Before I close, I want to take a moment to thank you as Member States for the support that you have given me. I also want to thank the dynamic UN Women staff, who have spent sleepless nights with great commitment, working well beyond what duty called them to do. There is no organization that I know of with people that are so dedicated to their work. It has really been a joy and a privilege to work with all of you.

I also want to thank my Executive Office, my Deputy Executive Directors and our staff that have supported us together. It has been great to work with them. What I say to them is thanks for your *ubuntu*. I am because you are.

And Member States, we will be with you and work with you in order to make sure that we build a strong organization.

Thank you.