

**Statement by
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on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women
at the
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in Latin America and the Caribbean
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Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies,
Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to address this 10th session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean. First let me join other speakers in extending my sincere thanks to our hosts, the people and the Government of Ecuador, for the excellent arrangements and hospitality for this important meeting. My heartfelt thanks go also to the ECLAC/CEPAL, and in particular the Women and Development Unit, for the honour of sharing this special moment with its distinguished participants. I look forward to the opportunity to learn this afternoon from the experience of the different Member States gathered here today in bringing gender equality more fully and sustainably into the development process.

The theme of our discussion this afternoon “political participation and gender parity in decision-making at all levels” is particularly timely, as it becomes increasingly recognized that gender equality in decision making is critical to the broader efforts for the empowerment of women. For the United Nations, this recognition dates back to the United Nations Charter which proclaims the equal rights of men and women. The equal participation of women and men in public life is one of the cornerstones of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 (Beijing) emphasized equal access to and full participation in decision-making. Similarly, through the UN Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security, the Millennium Declaration and Development Goals (MDGs) as well as the 2005 Summit Outcome, the international community reaffirmed the fundamental role of women in decision-making, be it on peace, development and human rights.

Three years ago at your ninth session, you agreed on the Mexico City Consensus by which the participating governments reaffirmed their determination to “promote the full and equal participation of men and women at all levels of decision-making in the State, society and the marketplace, and the participation of civil society, including non-governmental organizations and women’s organizations, in decision-making processes at

the local, national, regional and global levels to progress in the construction and exercise of full citizenship by all the women of the region” [para. 6(xxi)].

It is therefore befitting that at this tenth session we take stock of how far we have come.

Allow me to start with a broad overview. According to the June 2007 Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) data, women’s participation in decision-making in the legislative and executive branches is on the increase.

Parliament

- Women’s participation in parliaments in both houses stands at 17.3 per cent, up from 16.4 per cent in 2006.
- The number of parliaments that have reached the United Nations target of 30 per cent set for 1995 regrettably fell from 20 in 2006 to 19 currently.
- Only 35 women or 13.4% preside over one of the Houses of the 189 existing Parliaments. Eleven of the 35 Presiding Officers come from the Latin American and the Caribbean region.¹
- An encouraging trend is that a number of post-conflict countries appear in the top 30 countries with regard to women’s participation in legislative bodies, averaging between 25 and 30 per cent of women legislators. These include Rwanda, Mozambique, Burundi, Uganda, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Timor-Leste and Afghanistan.
- The top two countries in women’s representation in parliament are:

Rwanda	48.8 per cent
Sweden	47.3 per cent
- Globally, among the ten top ranking countries three are from Latin America and the Caribbean – Costa Rica with 38.6 per cent, Cuba with 36 per cent, and Argentina with 35 per cent women in parliament.
- In the executive branch, globally, 11 women are currently heads of state or government. Two of those are from this region: President Michelle Bachelet of Chile and Prime Minister Portia Simpson-Miller of Jamaica. The nine others are: Finland, Germany, Ireland, India, Liberia, Mozambique, New Zealand,

¹Antigua and Barbuda (House of Representatives and Senate); Bahamas (Senate); Belize (House of Representatives); Colombia (Senado de la república); Dominica (House of Assembly); Jamaica (Senate); Peru (Congreso de la República); Saint Kitts and Nevis (National Assembly); Saint Lucia (House of Assembly and Senate); Trinidad and Tobago (Senate); and Venezuela (Asamblea Nacional).

Philippines and Switzerland. Although the global figure was 12 in 1995, it dropped to 9 in 2000. Thus, we have made no progress in the last ten years. Let us hope that the positive experience of 2006 when a record number of six women took up the top position of State and/or Government – in Chile, Jamaica, Liberia, the Republic of Korea and Switzerland, and Israel (as an Acting President) would be an indication of the developments to come. We are encouraged by the recent election of a woman as the President of India.

- Finland, with 60 per cent of ministerial positions held by women, has overtaken Sweden which took the lead last year with 52.4 per cent ministerial positions being held by women. Austria, Chile and Spain have reached gender parity in their cabinets.

Yet, it must be acknowledged that in most countries, women ministers are a minority and remain concentrated in traditional social fields such as health, education and social affairs; even as we note that increasingly women are being assigned the portfolios of foreign affairs or defence.

At the regional level, the situation varies from region to region. The following trends have been observed:

- The Nordic countries continue to maintain the lead with 41.6 per cent women in parliament.
- The Americas' representation of women stands at 20 per cent.
- Europe, excluding Nordic countries, has a representation of women of 18.1 per cent.
- In Sub-Saharan Africa, the rate rose from 16.4 per cent in 2006 to 17.6 per cent.
- Asia's representation of women in parliaments is currently 16.6 per cent while that of the Pacific countries is 14.6 per cent.
- Although there were some encouraging developments in the Arab States in 2006, they still lag behind with women's representation in parliaments, amounting to only 9.6 per cent. However, for the first time, women stood for election and voted in the United Arab Emirates and in Kuwait in 2006 while in Bahrain, a woman was elected to the Lower House of Parliament for the first time in that nation's history.

Several factors account for the variations in women's parliamentary representation. Leaders' political will, sustained women's movements and the international community's continued emphasis on achieving gender equality and women's economic and political empowerment, play an important role. While the type of electoral system remains critical, the most influential factor has proved to be the use of a gender quota system. In 2006, countries that used gender quotas nearly doubled the number of elected women, compared with countries without any form of gender quota.

The establishment of quotas for women and men in lists of candidates for elected and appointed office has been your region's main mechanism for promoting women's

political participation. All but six of the Latin American and Caribbean countries have quota systems at the legislative level.

Quotas are of course not the “magic solution”. They can be very effective if they are well regulated, adapted to the electoral system, and enforced. They are a supportive mechanism that works best in combination with other measures such as training programmes and funding. Costa Rica’s Real Equality Act, for example, includes a provision that a percentage of the electoral subsidy given to political parties must be used to provide political training for women members.

There is evidence to suggest that the number of women in parliament does not necessarily translate into upward mobility within the parliamentary hierarchy. Women are often kept at the bottom of legislative hierarchies or in charge of “soft” assignments involving family, welfare and culture.

The impact of women’s participation and leadership, as well as their contributions to achieving gender equality goals, can be limited by patriarchal institutional norms, women’s overall legal and economic status within their society and underlying formal and informal power structures within political parties and parliaments.

For women to be effective in parliaments they need to learn the rules of the game; they need to know how to use the rules in order to bring about change; and they need to start changing the rules. Therefore it is important to train women on how to function in parliamentary committees, including those related to budget and finance issues; how to use the media and work with civil society organizations; and how to build strategic alliances with other women as well as with men.

If women are not involved in identifying problems as well as solutions, progress in development, in poverty eradication, in peace and security, in combating HIV/AIDS and many other areas will remain limited.

Moreover, participation in decision-making is a human rights issue. Women have the right to be represented and participate in taking decisions at every level, including family, community, country, regional and international levels. When women are excluded from these processes, their rights and responsibilities as citizens are not recognized nor reflected in the development of policies and programmes. Their interests and concerns are not adequately represented. Women’s participation brings new insights, priorities and solutions to policy debates. Societies with a low representation of women are less inclusive, less egalitarian, and ultimately less democratic. There is some evidence that the productivity of businesses is higher if the workforce is more diverse.

According to findings from a recent research conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO), women constitute only 33 per cent of managerial and administrative posts in the developed world; 15 per cent in Africa and 13 per cent in Asia and the Pacific. Currently, only 10 women are Chief Executive Officers of FORTUNE 500 companies (the 500 largest US companies). Women hold only 14.6 per cent of all

seats of board directors – at this rate it will take more than 70 years for women to achieve parity.

In the United Nations system itself, progress on women's representation has been limited and uneven and the goal of reaching 50/50 gender balance remains elusive. As of 31 December 2005 in the larger group of Professional staff with appointments of one year or more, the representation of women stood at 37.7 per cent with a slight improvement from the previous year. At the senior levels (D-1 and above), it is 24 per cent. None of the current peace operations is headed by a woman.

Critical barriers to women's equal participation in decision-making are deeply rooted in the persistence of stereotypical attitudes on the roles of women - inequitable sharing of family responsibilities between women and men, the absence of enabling environments in political institutions, and women's exclusion from decision-making in critical policy domains, such as international affairs and the economy.

Chairperson,

The global consensus is that gender equality is not only a goal in itself but also an essential element in achieving other national, regional and international development goals including good governance and the empowerment of women. I wish to underline the following points for your consideration:

First, creating an effective, supportive and enabling environment for women is critical to assuage their concerns over bias in favour of men, lack of transparency and entrenched stereotyping to name but a few.

Second, the enactment of equal opportunities and non-discrimination legislation is essential to guarantee women's participation in the economic, social and political spheres and their access to services and resources.

Third, effective measures to combat all forms of violence against women are required as the elimination of violence is key to women's full participation in all areas of life, including in the political sphere.

Fourth, measures must be taken within institutions – be they political parties, public administration or the private sector to include fair and transparent systems for the selection, performance evaluation and promotion; equal access to training opportunities and to special assignments.

Fifth, measures must be taken, including through legislation as appropriate, to ensure equal pay for work of equal value. The introduction or enhancement, as the case may be, of flexible working arrangements, parental leave and such other policies as would allow both men and women to balance work and family responsibilities would enhance women's participation..

Sixth, commitment at the highest level of all institutions including governments, political parties, public and private sector is critical. In exercising their managerial authority, all leaders must be committed to promoting gender equality.

Awareness raising programmes can help at all levels of hierarchy to refute myths about women's capabilities and skills.

Seventh, to prepare women for leadership positions, they must be given appropriate leadership education and training. Women aspiring to political positions should be provided with specialized skills training, including on policy development, debating, networking, strategic planning, and public speaking and leveraging resources. Similarly, in the private and public sectors, management and leadership training is necessary to create a critical mass of women with appropriate preparation to assume leadership positions.

Eighth, Networking for women, who have achieved leadership positions with other women in particular those aspiring to leadership positions can provide effective support mechanisms. Likewise women networks need to expand their engagement to develop partnerships with women and men in different institutions, parliament, political parties, civil society, media, universities or religious communities. Networks and alliances between women in business, trade unions and political parties can lead to constructive policy discussions and outcomes for women and men in all sectors.

Ninth, in order to build a critical mass and sustain the momentum for women's participation, women leaders need to actively support other women in their career development and explicitly promote gender equality and empowerment of women. This requires ready access to information about potential women candidates for senior appointments as a way of counter-balancing the more established networks that men may have. The development of a directory or database of women in leadership positions is one approach being utilized and reported by a number of countries and women's associations.

Chairperson,

The mere presence of women as executives in any area of societal development is not in itself a guarantee that gender equality issues will be placed on the agenda. More progress would require greater willingness among men to question male stereotypes and to change existing structures and processes, including redefining the roles of men and women in the family and in public life. Women leaders need therefore to develop strategic alliances with men who are willing to actively support women's participation and gender equality.

A lot has been done to support women's empowerment and promote gender equality. Let us build upon our achievements by dedicating ourselves to transform commitments into reality through concrete action. I wish you a successful meeting.
