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Regional Perspectives in Progress Achieved and Remaining Gaps and Challenges in the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action

Written Statement

Submitted by

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Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Members of the Panel,
Distinguished Representatives of UN agencies,
Distinguished Representatives of Civil Society,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have the honour of speaking on behalf of Mrs. Alicia Bárcena, the first woman to be appointed as Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Very significant process has been achieved in the region: in the last five years we have had four women elected as Heads of State, in Jamaica, Chile, Argentina, and most recently in Costa Rica. For the first time we have three women concurrently holding the highest authority of the State.

I would also like to assure the governments of Haiti and Chile of our support as part of the UN family during these difficult times. Our support will go to all the initiatives to reconstruct those countries in such a way that equality between men and women becomes a solid basis for development. Gender mainstreaming should be a fundamental principle in humanitarian and reconstruction processes.

Achievements

Countries in the region have made significant efforts to implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and all related international commitments. Progress has been uneven in the region; however, challenges remain very similar across the region. As we have done in the last 15 years, ECLAC will continue efforts to assist Member States in implementing their policies to achieve equality.

The region shows important gains in education; in the adoption of family and labour legislation, particularly measures to harmonize work and family; in increasing awareness and engagement at the highest level to combat gender based violence and HIV-AIDS; and last but not least, in the creation of national mechanisms for the advancement of women.

There has also been improvement in political participation. Currently, in 29 percent of the parliaments in the region, women hold over 20 percent of the elected seats. However, if the region maintains its current rate of growth, it would take at least **35 years more** for 40 percent of the seats to be held by women.

In addition to the increase in women as elected officials, there has also been an improvement in access to credit for women *micro entrepreneurs*. Another very significant improvement is the impact of pension reform policies in some countries, with increased recognition of the rights of women workers, such as domestic workers.

The establishment and strengthening of national women's mechanisms has been key to the implementation of gender policies. Another key factor has been the women's movement in its different expressions: first the feminist movement, then movements by indigenous women and women of African descent, and more recently the movement of men against violence.

All these movements have developed strategic alliances with women's national mechanisms and with legislators in order to promulgate legal framework and implement policies.

Persistent challenges

Previous to the current crisis, the region had experienced economic growth and poverty reduction to such an extent that most analysts agreed, in general, the region was ready to face the consequences of a global crisis. Our region was able to reduce poverty in a significant way, but if we look at this progress from the gender gap point of view, we see that while poverty was decreased by 13 percent during the last 20 years, the female poverty rate has been always higher than that of men. In 2008, this ratio was 138 women to 100 men.

Similarly, income gaps and overrepresentation in less secure jobs continued. Women also assumed most of the unpaid care giving work at home. This tells us about the need to mainstream gender in economic policies in such a way that the main obstacles for equal participation in the labour market are removed: unequal share of family responsibilities, gaps in education between men and women, unequal pay, and, finally, de facto discrimination.

Although the female population has not yet matched the economic participation levels of men, these levels are growing. As a result, there are relatively fewer women engaged in unpaid domestic work — work that, despite going unrecognized, has a very important value for society. Still, 30 percent of women living in urban areas do not have their own income and, therefore, lack economic autonomy. Consequently, they are more vulnerable to gender based violence and very often are submitted to other forms of exclusion in society, such as the denial of their reproductive rights.

Countries in the region vary in their preparedness to protect at-risk groups during and after an economic downturn. While the relatively more developed countries have a number of tools such as cash transfers to mitigate the impact of the crisis, in those with more incipient welfare states, the well-being of women largely depends on family and women's contributions mainly through unpaid work.

Violence affects up to 40 percent of women in the region. Although the quality of data on violence is low and most countries do not collect it systematically, those who do show a high prevalence of this *pandemic* with negative consequences for the implementation of all internationally agreed goals.

The road ahead

Distinguished Delegates,

In the region a new consensus is under consideration to be adopted in Brazil, at a meeting to be held from 13 to 16 July 2010, where more than 800 representatives from governments and civil society will gather to agree on the way forward, taking into consideration the main global challenges, including climate change and natural disasters, the uneven impact of the crisis on women's paid and unpaid work, strengthening the role of the state in protecting human rights of women, and the need to change discriminatory values and traditions.

A renewed social and fiscal covenant is necessary to build a culture of peace and to contribute to a society where there are equal opportunities for all. That said, the countries of the region have responded proactively to the economic and financial crises, adopting countercyclical economic and social measures. Nevertheless, no strategy has yet emerged to address the complex interdependence among the State, the family and the market, and to link up short-term responses with longer-term policies.

I would like to conclude by thanking the Governments of the region for their acknowledgement of the Gender Equality Observatory tool that has been fundamental in the preparation of the regional report.

I thank you for your kind attention.