

UN Women Executive Board, First Regular Session 2024, 12-13 February

Opening remarks by Ms Sima Bahous, UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women

12 February 2024

[As delivered]

Shared vision, effective collaboration, and unswerving determination

Distinguished delegates, special guests, and colleagues, good morning and welcome to the First Regular Session of the UN-Women Executive Board 2024.

My congratulations to the incoming President of the Executive Board on her election, H.E. Ambassador Markova Concepción Jaramillo. We all know what capable hands we are in, and we thank you and the Permanent Mission of Panama for your unwavering commitment to UN Women and its mandate.

Congratulations also to the other newly elected Members of the Bureau, Vice President H.E. Mr. Jonibek Ismoil Hikmat, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Tajikistan to the United Nations; Vice President H.E. Ms. Halley Christine Yapi Bah, Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative of the Côte d'Ivoire to the United Nations; Vice President H.E. Mr. Andreas Von Uexküll, Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative of Sweden to the United Nations; and Vice President Ms. Joanna Sylwia Skoczek, Minister Counsellor and Deputy Permanent Representative of Poland to the United Nations. It is a pleasure to see you all here today with us in your new roles.

I also acknowledge our dear Ambassador H.E. Sergiy Kyslytsya of Ukraine who so ably led our work last year. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador, and thank you also to all the Vice-Presidents that served on the Bureau in 2023, including the very capable representatives of Cameroon, Colombia, Italy, and Thailand.

I wish all our colleagues celebrating the Lunar New Year a prosperous year of the Dragon.

It gives me great pleasure to introduce my new deputies, Ms. Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda who oversees Normative Support, United Nations System Coordination and Programme Results and Ms. Kirsi Madi who oversees Resource Management, Sustainability and Partnerships.

You will get to know them well and I am sure share my confidence in their leadership. I know you already share my deep appreciation also for Ms. Sarah Hendriks and Mr. Moez Doraid who so ably served as UN Women Deputy Executive Directors in the interim. They will continue to support the Executive Leadership Team through this transition and beyond.

Allow me to also thank all members of the UN Women family, those working in country offices, in regional offices and here in New York, for their continued dedication, passion, and commitment to our mandate and our work, even in very challenging times. Our people are our strongest asset, and I thank them for their service.

I wish to speak briefly about the world we face at the start of 2024. I am sure we all feel an acute sense of increased global instability. Crises both local and global preoccupy us, and rightly so. I wish before going further to ask that we collectively take a moment to remember and honour all women and girls affected by crises, whoever and wherever they are.

Together, we will continue to highlight their courage and strength, whether in Afghanistan where women are all but erased from public life, in Gaza and across the Occupied Palestinian Territory, where women bear the brunt of decades of occupation, unimaginable loss of lives and scale of destruction, disease and risk of famine; in Israel where many are still waiting for their loved ones to return and many more mourning those they lost, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in Haiti, Myanmar, the Sahel, South Sudan, Sudan and elsewhere. We will continue to work with and for all women everywhere for peace, development, justice and a life free from all forms of violence.

I salute all those who risk and even lose their lives in the pursuit of gender equality and the rights of women and girls in the most difficult of circumstances. And I honour the more than 150 UN colleagues killed in Gaza, the largest loss of life in the history of the organization.

Beyond crises, in this year of elections for 4 billion people in 75 countries across the world, we see increasing polarization, democratic recession and shrinking civic space. In such political and social environments, we frequently see opposition to the basic norms of gender equality and women's empowerment that we had previously considered unquestionable. Hard-won gains hang in the balance and the challenges remain significant.

It is still the case that halfway to the 2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals, no indicators for the gender equality goal are "met or almost met"; still true that less than one per cent of women and girls live in a country with high women's empowerment and a small gender gap; still shocking that men own US\$105 trillion more wealth than women.

And it is deeply alarming that on current trajectory some 340 million women and girls will live in extreme poverty by 2030; still folly that we spurn the gender dividend which time and again is proven to be the smartest investment we can make to achieve the SDGs.

However strident the voices pushing back against us, we as UN Women will always be on the side of all women and girls. We, together with you, must collectively ensure that women's

rights are at the forefront of our agenda, and of the 75 electoral processes that we will witness this year globally. We must use our leverage to ensure that political leaders do more than pay electoral service to gender equality and women's empowerment.

This year's International Women's Day focuses, in line with the theme of CSW68, on investing in women as the best way to accelerate progress and achieve gender equality. Ultimately our talk of commitment to gender equality means little if it is not backed up by resources. I call on all Member States and stakeholders to make progress on this crucial issue at CSW68 and reach concrete and progressive agreed conclusions that reflect the crucial need for financing gender equality, women's empowerment and women's organizations. These organizations are the lifeline for many: they are peacebuilders, mediators, change makers in their communities, and they remain at the frontlines in the service of women and girls. We must do whatever we can to ensure that their work is successful.

While we will share our results for women and girls in 2023 at the Annual Session in the context of my Annual Report, I would like to give you at least a sense of what was again a year of significant achievements.

For example, our joint programme with ILO and UNODC "Safe and Fair", changed the lives of women migrant workers in Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam, driving the development of 84 new laws, policies and strategies on labour and ending violence against women expanding the rights of over 35 million people across the 8 countries.

We also stepped up in crises, whether through bringing crucial knowledge to humanitarian response, for example through our Gender Alerts that highlight the differentiated needs of women and girls in conflict and amplified their asks, or supporting women conflict mediators in Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Palestine, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda. We are currently leading or co-leading gender and humanitarian action groups in 90 per cent of settings where they are active and delivering lifesaving services to women and girls in 33 crisis settings.

This is a significant step up and a demonstration of our commitment to the IASC and our partners in crisis settings.

I am particularly proud of UN Women's role at country level on ending violence against women through the Spotlight Initiative, which has directly supported local women's organizations through 24 country programmes and 6 regional programmes, while also strengthening national budgets to be more gender responsive across 18 countries.

Throughout we continued to play our role as global convener, for example through Generation Equality where Commitment Makers reported \$47 billion in financial commitments. This year,

one of UN Women's key priorities with our partners is to advance the localization of Generation Equality to enable a greater focus on achieving and measuring country-level results. This both responds and contributes to my priority of pivoting to the field, pivoting to the countries.

We are also convening and leveraging the private sector, with our signature private sector engagement initiatives going from strength to strength. The Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs), led by UN Women and the Global Compact, are now signed by some 9000 companies in 160 countries around the world. Our Unstereotype Alliance members are measurably improving the way gender is portrayed in some \$600 billion-worth of advertising a year.

I am proud that we can share with you our twelfth consecutive unqualified audit opinion on our Financial Statements for the year ending December 31, 2022. This is also our third year in a row where we have no long-outstanding recommendations from the UN Board of Auditors.

I have promised you increased transparency and organizational performance and these achievements reflect that. We continue to seek organizational improvement guided by the insights and recommendations of the UN Board of Auditors and in line with our Strategic Plan, including shifting our attention closer to the country level, and I know that both Nyaradzayi and Kirsi will continue to pursue this with us.

This, and all our work would not be possible without resources. You will be pleased to hear that based on our preliminary figures we increased expenditure in 2023 from previous years, demonstrating our growing absorptive capacity and the investments we are making on your behalf in the implementation of UN Women's Strategic Plan.

Based on preliminary figures our revenue grew again in 2023. Importantly we saw growth in Regular, or Core, Resources. We recognize the confidence and trust these contributions represent, the responsibility we have to use those resources efficiently and wisely, and the need to communicate effectively on their impact.

However, I would be remiss if I did not also share that the financial outlook for 2024 for UN Women is, as with the rest of the UN system, less bright, and some of our consistent partners have announced cuts. In real terms, this means that we will be able to reach far fewer women and girls at a time when they need us, and you, the most.

We have a very substantive agenda ahead of us today. Under the segment on evaluation we will discuss communications. The metasynthesis ultimately makes the case for strengthening communications capacity across the organization and to do so strategically and in a joined-up manner. I could not agree more, and this is something we are working on and investing in. We

are particularly determined to strengthen our capacity to tell the story of the results we achieve for women and girls and to tell it better.

We will hear about our work in the diverse and crucial continent of Africa where we find both huge progress and achievements as well as challenges for gender equality. We will share how we work, together with our sister entities, government, civil society, the private sector, and other stakeholders to advance the priorities of our Strategic Plan, including in the area of women's economic empowerment.

We will show how we achieve results with and through others, to innovate and convene, to add value to humanitarian response, and to build partnerships and approaches to tackle some of the continent's most obdurate development challenges.

I welcome our consideration of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS Programme Coordination Board meeting. We share the concern of many that the partial success in the HIV response in some regions has led to a degree of complacency. Women and girls over 15 remain disproportionately impacted, with almost twice the number of new infections compared to men.

We will hear during this session about the 2023 joint field visit of the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, WFP and UN-Women to Senegal. I commend their report to you and was pleased to hear their positive feedback on UN Women's efforts there, in particular how our work is both highly integrated into the UN system and catalytic.

And last, but certainly not least, we will also hear from our Staff Council, reflecting the crucial voice of the colleagues who make what we discuss in our sessions a reality and I look forward to their intervention.

In an increasingly polarized world, UN Women remains on the side of all women and girls. We continue to carry out the mandate you gave us as faithfully as we can, remaining true to the principles of the United Nations, true to the standards that the General Assembly created us to serve. We do so in close collaboration with you, our Board and all stakeholders, including Member States and civil society.

We draw inspiration from youth who continue to be the drivers of change and who guide us with energy and clarity of vision.

Looking ahead, there is much to do together. We will be at CSW68 soon – indeed very soon. Later this year, the Summit of the Future will provide an important platform for international cooperation to meet the needs of the present and prepare for the challenges of the future. Ensuring that the Pact for the Future is relevant to the world's women and girls will be an important task for us all.

The convergence of the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 10-year milestone for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will make our preparations this year all the more crucial.

Be assured of UN Women's commitment to work with Member States and all stakeholders tirelessly to that end.

While the world may seem even more complex, our ultimate shared goal remains clear and simple. We are not to be, and will not be, knocked off course. The many crises we manage today do not compete for our energies. Rather they redouble them.

They do so not because they demonstrate women's and girls' vulnerability. Rather, they remind us of what our vision of a gender equal world means. Development, prosperity, sustainability, and peace are all founded on equality. Gender equality and women and girls with the opportunity to achieve their fullest potential, are prerequisites for everything the United Nations collectively aspire to. I look forward to continuing to pursue that path, together with you, with shared vision, effective collaboration, and unswerving determination.

I thank you.