

First Regular Session of UN Women Executive Board

Remarks by Patricia Cortes

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Madam President, Excellencies, UN Women Executive Leadership, esteemed colleagues,

Thank you for your invitation to address our Executive Board in its first regular session in 2025.

Let me begin by honouring our colleagues who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of humanity. In the words of the Secretary-General, the conflict in Gaza during 2023/2024 is “by far the highest number of our personnel killed in a single conflict or natural disaster since the creation of the United Nations.” The Staff Council deeply mourns this loss, along with the sacrifices of our personnel in Sudan, Ukraine, Haiti, and other conflict-affected areas. These events underscore the critical importance of the concept of duty of care, which has never been more urgent or tangible.

At the interagency level, 2024 was marked by our collective commitment to strengthening representation in our organizations. Last year we successfully established the Global Forum of Local Staff and Personnel Associations, uniting Local Staff Associations across the four organizations we represent, aiming strengthened advocacy, knowledge-sharing, and capacity-building. Regional and global consultations amplified personnel voices, particularly at regional and country levels, fostering more inclusive human resources policies and initiatives.

Our commitment to advancing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) across our organizations is another highlight. Through a series of impactful webinars, we facilitated meaningful conversations on these critical issues, promoting awareness, understanding, and action. These efforts not only highlighted the importance of DEI but also worked to embed a culture of belonging and inclusivity within our organizations, ensuring that every individual feels valued and empowered to contribute their best.

The Staff Council’s efforts have also addressed critical personnel issues, including mental health, well-being, career development, and advancing contractual equity. By advocating for fair practices and transparent processes, we safeguarded rights and benefits while prioritizing inclusion, growth, and the well-being of all personnel, regardless of contract type or duty station.

Madam president,

This term has coincided with significant organizational changes, including decentralization, realignments, and restructuring across agencies. The Staff Council has remained at the forefront, consistently championing the voices and concerns of personnel during these transformative processes, focusing on fostering empathy, transparency, and fairness.

At UN Women, as Staff Council representatives, my colleague Athena Cortez and I have maintained a critical and collaborative approach with management and facilitated internal conversations with colleagues while addressing concerns of personnel including around transparency. Through our mobilization efforts, we achieved tangible progress, including:

- Expanding consultations on the pivot model from Division Directors to Section Chiefs, enhancing operational understanding.
- Advocating for team-level discussions to assess the initiative's impact.

- Extending the implementation timeline from 2025 to 2026, providing personnel more time to adapt and prepare.
- Securing UN Women's commitment to develop a comprehensive HR Support Plan tailored to personnel needs.

We have worked tirelessly over the last year on promoting transparency and fairness in management's pivot-related efforts, including alerting them where we saw gaps in consultation and suggested action to address these gaps. In the past two weeks alone, we conducted six consultations for all HQ General Service staff, Affiliate personnel, and International Professionals. These consultations were important to inform the process going forward and provide our personnel commitment to align with management's vision for the future, however they surfaced remaining key concerns about both the Pivot process and its impact on personnel. Key highlights include the following:

A. The Pivot Process

Transparency and Communication:

- Despite the Staff Council's best efforts, HQ colleagues raised concerns about a perceived lack of transparency in the functional decision making, others even fear that the partial relocation might weaken UN Women's New York presence.
- Others raised concerns about sustainability of funding for relocated posts, particularly those reliant on non-core resources – despite the new locations of the posts being considerably less expensive than New York based posts.
- Colleagues have requested even more detailed plans, including functional analysis, scenario planning, location criteria, performance indicators, and a thorough risk assessment to be shared with all personnel. While management has shared relevant information, personnel continue to stress that more should be shared.

Business Continuity:

- Colleagues raised that now that decision have been made, it is paramount to ensure uninterrupted delivery during the transition which also requires addressing long-standing capacity gaps, maintaining operational efficiency, and fostering a supportive work environment.
- Teams both in countries and at HQ raised that teams across multiple time zones need clear communication protocols, equitable meeting schedules, and flexibility to support collaboration while minimizing impacts on work-life balance. This is a lot of work for the coming months and we in the Staff Council stand ready to support staff in these efforts and hold management to account.

B. Impact on Personnel

Gender Lens and Individual Circumstances:

- Colleagues have emphasized that personal circumstances of those unable to relocate should be handled with fairness and confidentiality.
- Tailored support is critical for spousal employment, children's education, and other personal circumstances, including assessing how the Pivot could impact our LGBTIQ+ colleagues and those with dependents living with disabilities.

Career Development and Job Security:

- While management emphasizes that this is not a downsizing exercise, colleagues remain concerned about job losses, career growth pathways, and demand the prioritization of internal candidates which underscores the need for a strategy that safeguards opportunities for all personnel.
- While management has outlined the broad principles, more clarity is needed around the impact of the Pivot over General Service and affiliated personnel and what are the concrete job opportunities that will be open for them.
- As UN Women Staff Council representatives, we urge management to secure robust measures to safeguard job security and ensure equitable career growth opportunities for all colleagues—especially those most at risk.

As Staff Council representatives, we remain committed to ensuring a thorough understanding of the human resource impacts on personnel's lives and working conditions. While the Pivot Task Team has addressed some questions, we welcome the Human Resources Support Plan for the Pivot and urge its implementation plan be informed by our feedback.

This engagement is vital to ensuring the Plan embodies UN Women's commitment to duty of care for its personnel in tangible and actionable ways. Ultimately, the trust and confidence of personnel in this process, and in the organization's ability to live up to its values, hinge on the quality of the management response. We look forward to continuing our collaborative efforts to ensure that UN Women delivers on its commitments while safeguarding the well-being of its workforce.

Madam President,

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Executive Board. Our newly elected Staff Council will reflect the issues raised in our interaction with our Boards in our next programme of work for the next 2 years. We would like to echo our chair's words of appreciation to management of our agencies for their open door and attentiveness to the concerns we raise. This is indeed our experience at UN Women.

2025 poses many challenges to the United Nations and its workforce. Conflicts, disasters, and climate change impacts will increase demands on staff. There is greater pushback on our mandates and reduced funding, when we need it most. To meet these challenges and maintain a strong and healthy workforce, we need to invest in our human resources.

We rely on you – our Member States – in ensuring an enabling and safe environment so we can serve people in need. We call on you to fulfill your responsibility to fund and sustain the United Nations system.

Lastly, we rely on our leadership to invest in its strongest asset – people - to ensure the highest performance in an ever more complex and uncertain world.

Thank you.