

Opening Remarks by Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka at the Annual Session of the Executive Board
22 June 2020

Let me start by wishing you and your loved ones good health. I am very pleased that we are welcoming you to this first virtual Annual Session of the UN Women Executive Board. Although we miss our in-person meetings, we nevertheless are determined to forge ahead with this virtual platform.

The current situation has denied us many important events that were planned for the year 2020 in order to mark 25 years of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Notably, it denied us a very important session of the Commission on the Status of Women. We are hoping that we will be able to integrate many of those activities in Generation Equality work and later in the year when we mark Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. So, all is not lost. I trust our collective resilience will make sure that we save anything we can of this year's important activities.

Let me start by thanking the President and the Bureau for their exceptional support for our mandate. We have felt your solid strength behind us, including on special occasions such as Finland's hosting of UN Women's first Partner Roundtable, and in the [joint townhall of the Executive Boards on 21 April](#) on the systemwide COVID-19 response with our UN Deputy Secretary-General and WHO's Director-General. I also recognize your important increased financial support. Finland now is our top donor. I thank you for this important contribution.

Since the Executive Board met for the first regular session of 2020, which was on 14 February, COVID-19 has changed the world. We have responded rapidly to the demands, with agile reprioritization, enabled by the flexibility granted by our partnerships with governments, donors and the other stakeholders that we collaborate with.

Our work to end inequality and discrimination has never been so important and central to the work of the UN, especially protection of the gains made by women and girls that are under threat. Our messages and our goals resonate with all those who are now also fighting to end injustices, including racial injustice and homophobia.

The process of self-examination within and beyond our own organization that has accompanied the recent events in the US and elsewhere has been a healthy and rightfully uncomfortable process that we intend to continue. That place of discomfort is where change happens, and it is a trigger to build the diversity we need for the future. It is indeed part of building back better. It is easy to settle into the patterns that are building-blocks of blatant and sometimes structural prejudices. But if we deal with the discomfort that dealing with it brings about, we begin the true, constructive road.

On 2 July, next week, it will be the 10-year anniversary of the establishment of UN Women by the UN General Assembly in resolution 64/289. As we approach that milestone, I hope you can celebrate with us in this new normal, with purpose, and recommit to the vision that created UN Women.

As the world focused on protecting populations against COVID-19, we have had reluctantly to downscale or postpone important events like the Commission on the Status of Women and we have had to delay the hosting of the Generation Equality Forum. We have, however, been able to resume Generation Equality preparations. Our Action Coalitions are coming together and we have already announced their leaders. We continue with deeper engagement in readiness for 2021, undaunted by the pandemic, with more than 660 million people who are already connected on social media and focusing on what they can do for Generation Equality.

Distinguished Members of the Board, pandemics are not gender-neutral, and the COVID-19 pandemic has been no exception. It has strained health systems, widened socioeconomic gaps, and shifted, in some cases, strategic and funding priorities, all of which have disproportionately affected women and girls. In response, our efforts have focused explicitly on violence against women; economic impacts; women's leadership; gender data, the burden of care, and the dangers of the digital divide.

I must also add that there is a lot of grief out there with all the people who have passed as a result of the pandemic. Collectively, as the world, we have to see how we will deal with this grief.

As UN Women, we have focused on producing policy briefs on the issues that have framed the key areas of action, with recommendations that have provided valuable leadership, and coalesced action within and outside the UN. We led the preparation of the Secretary-General's *Policy Brief on the Impact of COVID-19 on Women*, with inputs from multiple agencies, and provided gender-analytical insights to support the *UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19*.

We were able to take swift action, in part because you made this possible financially. I would like to thank all our partners who made early payments and increased contributions to regular resources this year. We have spent that money well. I also appreciate your direct support to UN Women's Global Programme on COVID-19, as well as the UN COVID-19 Response and Recovery Multi-Partner Trust Fund.

The UN Trust Fund is establishing a COVID-19 Special Funding Window to bolster the core resources of current grantee organizations, as well as support long-term interventions for women and girl survivors that are specific to the context of the pandemic.

In partnership with the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative, the UN Trust Fund has already allocated USD 9 million for immediate support to women's organizations in sub-Saharan Africa, with a primary focus on institutional response, risk mitigation and recovery.

We also seek to influence new partners, including international financial institutions, so that their lending to countries for recovery has a greater focus on women and girls. We are co-organizing roundtables with the multilateral development banks to support this important dialogue.

The pandemic has had a major impact on violence against women and girls and service provision. To understand this better, UN Women undertook rapid assessments in 49 countries across five regions. We found that there is indeed an increase in calls to helplines across countries, and an increase in reports of violence against women to police and health centres. Shelters' operations are at full capacity, and service providers are finding it difficult to maintain services in place because of the demand. Survivors of violence against women have limited access to information, and limited access to social, health, legal and protection services. We have been able to raise the alarm as a result.

In response, we have focused our efforts on integrating violence against women within national policy responses; ensuring access to essential services; driving data collection on the extent and impact of COVID-19 on gender-based violence; and providing direct support to women's civil society organizations. We have called for these services to be declared '*essential services*' during and beyond the fight against COVID-19.

For example, in countries such as Cameroon, Central African Republic, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal, UN Women is strengthening access to essential and quality services for women survivors of violence during the pandemic. We are supporting partners to update referral pathways and service delivery protocols, including with police and justice institutions in Bolivia, Ecuador, South Africa, Sudan, Trinidad and Tobago and Vanuatu.

Our influential '[Shadow 'Pandemic](#)' advocacy on violence against women has supported a global awareness of its power dynamics, its links to inequalities, and its prevalence in our societies.

With our HeForShe movement we launched a targeted campaign called #HeForSheAtHome. Through this, we have been able to engage men around the world with 27 million impressions garnered in different countries. India's tiktok campaign had particularly high views.

The economic impact of the pandemic is similarly grave – the [World Bank](#) has warned it could push up to 100 million more people into extreme poverty, of which the majority are likely to be women.

Most women workers are concentrated in sectors especially hard hit by COVID-19, in service industries like tourism, hospitality and the care industries, and the micro, small- and medium-size enterprises as well as the informal sectors are also hard hit. They are experiencing employment losses, income insecurity, and increases in their unpaid care work. Their jobs, that have been shown to be so crucial for our survival, are often undervalued, underpaid or not paid at all. This has to change in our building back better.

Economic recovery will not be possible without additional and sizeable fiscal stimulus packages, not only for the big industries but also for the smaller businesses that women tend to be concentrated in. This has implications therefore for women as it determines the volume of expenditures available for investing in gender equality. This has to concern us.

By early May at least 120 countries had put in place a fiscal response to COVID-19 totalling roughly USD 8 trillion. An initial review of these packages indicates that few, if any, were designed with a gender lens. We are paying attention to that too, because it has potential to leave women behind.

We have also been focusing on social protection, on addressing food insecurity that affects women and addressing the limited infrastructure that denies women critical services. Our response is to these gaps.

We have also focused on the leadership and participation of women. Women, and women's organizations, must be included in COVID-19 response, to ensure planning and decision-making affect women positively. We have therefore invested in strengthening women's organizations, and their bargaining power, as well as ensuring that the women who are in the frontline response to COVID-19 are given an opportunity to contribute effectively.

To address this, UN Women and the OECD convened the [Women Leaders' Virtual Roundtable on COVID-19 and the Future](#). In the regions, we also convened and joined forces with the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) to convene high-level [meetings with Ministers](#). In Africa we also convened with the African Union, bringing together women ministers to exchange experiences and lessons. That also included focus on the Global Ceasefire called by the Secretary-General, which was tackled together with the AU campaign 'Silencing of the Guns'.

We will continue and expand our direct support to women's organizations, through UN Women's [Women, Peace and Humanitarian Fund](#), the Spotlight Initiative and the [Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women](#), adapting to the new realities that constrain many of the women's movements active in this space.

We have placed a premium on collecting data, on data analysis, and on making sure that we have data that is timely and able to influence our plans. This forms part of our pledge to support governments in the UN Development System and other stakeholders to understand and address the gender impact of the crisis.

UN Women has partnered with WHO to produce and publish the most comprehensive sex-disaggregated data available on the health impact of COVID-19. The 'Women Count Data Hub' has offered the first COVID-19 data by sex for 125 countries.

We are also investing in rapid gender assessment surveys of the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 in 40 countries, in collaboration with national partners and many UN Agencies. UN Women is building a common UN System dashboard of gender indicators for the UN Multi-Party Trust Fund on COVID-19. We aim to create a central data hub on the 'Women Count' platform, populated by data from all UN agencies.

Excellencies, all these activities that I have highlighted show how much, in fighting the pandemic, we have been able to draw on the UN reforms and work collaboratively with other agencies. We will make sure that we integrate our work and that we make a plan of action to deliver for the SDGs in a manner that takes advantage of the new opportunities opened by the UN reforms.

Our strategic UN system coordination mandate remains critical in fostering an integrated, whole-of-UN-system response with UN Women providing thought leadership and coordination support on gender analysis.

We also have expanded and deepened partnerships both within and beyond the UN. This continues to enable us to achieve greater scale and impact to improve the lives of women and girls and address the humanitarian-development nexus. With better arrangements for engagement with the humanitarian IASC we could do even more.

Since the last update, as part of the work to bring greater focus, quality and to create the possibilities to scale our work, UN Women has successfully completed the pilot phase for quarterly portfolio review. This will enable us to plan further, based on the lessons we have learnt from this process.

It is vital that UN-Women works ever-more closely across the UN system, as was underlined by you as Member States at the recent [joint meeting of the Executive Boards](#).

We have leveraged our system-wide mandate to lead and coordinate the UN's gender equality efforts. We now have 350 Gender Focal Points engaged in pushing for gender parity and building an enabling environment across the UN System. I also want to thank the International Gender Champions for the collaboration we have had with them and congratulate them for their fifth anniversary.

We are in the process of developing field-specific *Enabling Environment Guidelines* to help increase representation of women in the field and accelerate efforts to reach parity.

On the Common Chapter, we have taken note of the joint statement delivered by Switzerland at the June 2020 session of the UNDP/UNFPA Executive Boards on the future of the common chapter.

UN Women has regularly been in discussions with the other three Common Chapter agencies regarding the specifics of how we will be moving ahead with work on the Common Chapter, and we will jointly agree on that way forward.

I would like to turn now to our Strategic Plan 2018-2021. This year marks the mid-point in its implementation. I am pleased to say that we are largely on track, with a Strategic Plan that remains vital and relevant.

As outlined in my Annual Report, UN Women has achieved significant results in the last two years in the areas of: legislative reform; humanitarian services for women and girls and gender-responsive disaster plans – even though I must also add that we can do more there if we had a better arrangement in our relationship with the interagency committee. We have also focused on decent work for women, embedding change in social norms, attitudes and behaviour in national plans and curricula to address violence against women, and to improve protocols for quality services for survivors of violence, as well as influencing peace processes in partnership with civil society.

We have achieved good performance for 72 per cent of the Strategic Plan indicators. At the same time, we also know that some areas are under-performing. We will need to redouble efforts to meet our 2021 targets and achieve replicable, scalable results, to avoid the pitfalls of funding fragmentation.

Let me now address UN Women's financial position. I am delighted to state that in 2019, UN Women achieved its largest-ever total revenue of US\$527.4 million with contributions from 106 governments. On behalf of the women and girls of the world, I want to thank you. The 15 largest government contributors in 2019 were: European Commission, Sweden, Norway, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Finland, Switzerland, Japan, Denmark, Canada, Australia, United States of America, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and the United Arab Emirates. But a funding gap still exists.

'Other resources' exceeded the integrated budget endorsed by the Executive Board by US\$117.4 million. However, there is still a shortfall in regular resources of US\$57 million, or 28.5 per cent of budgeted projections.

Our sustainability and our ability to deliver high quality and timely support depends on a healthy balance between core and non-core resources. The change in this balance, from 55 per cent in 2011 to 29 per cent in 2019, is of serious concern. It marks the first time in our history that regular resources fell below the Funding Compact threshold of 30 per cent.

Voluntary contributions in 2019 totaled USD 500.4 million. This comprised US\$143 million in regular resources (a reduction of USD 7 million from 2018) and USD 357.4 million in other resources (which is an increase of USD 122.2 million from 2018). Non-core resources were considerably boosted by the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative, with UN Women receiving around USD 60 million.

We count on Member States' to help us to navigate this difficult but very important part of our work.

I am pleased to state that we have also continued to make progress in diversifying our funding, with a special focus on private sector partnerships, as well as strengthened partnership with other UN agencies. In 2019, revenue from private sector partners increased by 31 per cent to reach USD 32.8 million, while revenue from inter-agency funding arrangements grew by 44 per cent, to USD 72.4 million.

It is important that you know you can trust us with your resources because we have consistently demonstrated solid fiduciary management. In 2019, UN Women achieved its 9th unqualified audit since inception. We are proud of that achievement and we thank the team that worked very hard to ensure that we achieved that result.

We recognize the vital importance of leveraging partnerships in order to achieve the scale and impact we seek. And we are pursuing with particular emphasis through Generation Equality many different new options that would support the funding of our work, even if the funds were not currently directed to us. One of our creative partnerships is with our Unstereotype Alliance, which engages the marketing and advertising industry.

This year so far has been unprecedented in its demands on UN Women; on our staff, who have been resilient in these difficult times, on our partners, and on our Member States, so many of which are still fighting to control the coronavirus in their own countries.

Just last week we joined across the entity in a memorial service for our beloved Representative at the UN Women Multi-Country Office for the Caribbean, Mrs. M. Alison McLean, who passed. Nothing speaks more highly of her commitment to the service of the UN than that she was literally at work until her last day, after having been sick for a very long time. We reaffirm the values that drive us to serve the women and girls of the world in the manner in which Alison did.

We commit to tackle the scourge of racism, inside and outside the UN, with reconsidered effort. Now, more than ever, we remain fully focused on our mandate and we continue to count on your solidarity in ensuring that we will build back better, together.

Thank you.