

**Department of Economic and Social Affairs**  
Office for ECOSOC Support and Coordination

# Achieving Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment and Strengthening Development Cooperation

DIALOGUES AT THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL



United Nations  
New York, 2010

## **Department of Economic and Social Affairs**

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

United Nations publication

Sales No. E.10.IV.10  
ISBN 978-92-1-130302-5

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# Women's rights as human rights

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BY MS. MICHELLE BACHELET<sup>3</sup>

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*Former President of Chile*

**I**t has been 15 years since the historic world conference on women in Beijing, which marked the major progress in the struggle to end multiple types of discrimination against women throughout the world and defined a clear mission to promote women's right. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Actions serve as an important action plan for women's right, gender equality and female empowerment all over the globe.

The international community must turn these principles defined in Beijing into concrete actions and continue encouraging governments and civil society organizations to ensure conditions of real equality for women for all nations.

We must be particularly attentive to the harsh realities of places where, due to cultural and even religious reasons, women experience multiple forms of discrimination, oppression and violence and we just cannot tolerate this situation and must condemn them without hesitation.

We must reserve our utmost fervent solidarity for women, who find themselves in situations of subjugation and, in some cases, slavery. We must always say it loud and clear that human rights are universal and gender equality as an expression of those rights is universal as well so women's rights are human rights. No philosophical, political, religious or other reasons can justify the violation of these fundamental ideals and this is the type of globalization that we have to value to the utmost.

I am convinced that, in order to put an end to these institutions, laws, and customs that perpetuate gender inequality the international community must carry out a monumental and consistent effort to break the inertia of injustice.

You could say that we must and I quote "move mountains" and that is correct. That is what we need to do and, in order to move mountains, we must act

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decisively. Much progress has been made since the Beijing conference and it is important to mention it because it serves as the foundation for the next steps we have to take.

I think that the main achievements are the gender equality causes are more vigorous and there is more awareness of the need to change structures that subjugate women. We know that the progress that we have made is far from uniform. In some countries, women have reached very high-level positions while, in others, there are few spaces for them to work or to participate in civic affairs and they do suffer a lot of discrimination.

Politically correct statements about this matter are not enough. We need for women to stop being marginalized by structures of power and to stop being just minorities with little decision-making powers because, on the contrary, in many societies, women are the same in numbers or in leaders. So, we need both the jury and the factor equality.

We must make empowerment a reality. Truly working so that women can become the protagonist of their own emancipation. All societies need to encourage this process as part of our efforts to leave behind the archaic customs, sexist prejudices, and confinement to roles established for women by patriarchy. All of these things have stunted the progress of humanity and it can be done.

I had the immense honour of being the first woman to be elected President of the Republic of Chile. My election in 2006 was evidence of a profound cultural transformation that has taken place in Chile since its democracy was restored in 1990, following 16 and a half years of dictatorship. I have not forgotten about how, on the day I took office, thousands of women throughout the country wore a presidential sash across their chest just like the one I wore as a symbol of the fact that they all felt that they were entering la Moderna, the presidential palace, alongside me.

At the end of my term in March of this year, I was privileged to see how proud so many women were of the progress we have made, particularly in the area of social protection, which shaped a very popular measure in my country, influencing health, education, opportunities for women for children and for girls. We realize that in many countries, women are invisible so one of my first decisions was to re-visibility women. And we put together a cabinet of ministers and vice-ministers made up of an equal number of men and women. This had never been done before in Chile and, of course, provoked a lot of criticisms. I also placed a number of women in other top governmental positions to the regional government or in important public agencies. This was not an easy task.



I witnessed the uneasiness that female leadership awaits in some parts of the political class. This dissent has manifested itself in different ways and I have to be strong, in order to do my job without feeling intimidated. I sought to establish forms of fluid contact and dialogue with citizens in the context of realizing democracy. I set out to encourage people's participation in civil society by allowing them to participate in the creation of public policies on education, early childhood matters, salaries, pensions and a lot of other issues. This took place through the creation of advisory commissions made up of community representatives and experts from across the political spectrum. Afterwards, we were able to create several important bills that we sent to Congress for discussion and I would say with very fast approval. And it worked very well.

Power is not exercised in just one way but, throughout history, different leadership styles have all shared the imprint of masculinity. Dominant notions of authority, decision-making skills and leadership qualities are all confined within a rhetoric that is defined mainly by men. And, as President, I realized that people were much more critical of my leadership just because I am a woman. In different ways, many people implied that it was up to me to prove that I was qualified to be President and, following my election, some came to the conclusion that sexism in the Chilean society has died out but prejudices do not die easily.

During my first month in office, I learned that my errors would be judged more severely by those led by a man. Despite everything, we worked patiently, hard, and consistently and we demonstrated that female leadership can be as efficient and get good results, too.

My administration sought to ensure that women will receive the rights that they were due not only in discourse but also when putting public policies into practice, in legislations, and in governmental programmes. And one relevant issue of leveling opportunities for women is access to jobs with developed programmes supporting women capacity and skills and technical and entrepreneurial skills and also something very important – access to credit, in order to generate real conditions for improving women's possibilities, opportunities, job and salaries. One key law we passed during my term was one that established salary equality between men and women performing the exact same function.

However, probably the most prominent change made during those years was our pension system reform. The main component of this reform was a subsidy for thousands of women who have long been excluded from the job market

or who have only held low level jobs without benefits. Today, women from the three lowest-income quintiles of the population, 60 per cent are working women will be guaranteed with a pension starting when they turn 65 whether they have worked outside of home or not and regardless of the type of jobs they held. Clearly, we have seen that the work we have done for women has benefitted society, in general. Men benefit because they have lost the negative attitude that they once had and can form more equitable relationship with women, their willingness to do more housework and help raise the children is one form of progress.

One key issue has to do with reproductive rights because, of course, maternal health is essential. I am a doctor and we have improved a lot in maternal health in our country. It was also thought that we need to improve reproductive rights and so we made progress by broadening birth control regulations and legalizing emergency contraception, commonly known as the morning-after pill. And today, Chilean women have more control over their own bodies, which is tremendously important. But we also believe that in equal societies, inequality starts from the crib so that is why we have developed a childhood support programme with special emphasis on health and access to initial education and we multiply by 5 times the number of nursery facilities free of charge for the most vulnerable families and children, so that they can start having opportunities earlier on in their lives. In the meanwhile, in order for democracy to be fully achieved, gender equality must come about in the public sphere, particularly in politics.

In my country, Latin America, and in the rest of the world, we have to do much more to increase the participation of women in all decision-making voice. Gender quotas can help increase the number of women in public health – for example.

I believe that consciousness-raising campaign about the equal participation of women in the public sphere, leadership training and transparent hiring practices are all very important. First, we must eliminate discriminatory laws and practices and then we can encourage participation at the highest possible level right away. I believe that political parties should commit to achieving gender parity within the leadership and also in the list of candidates that they put up for elections.

As you all know, the southern region of my country was hit last February 27th by an earthquake that measured 8.8 on the Richter scale. A wide strip of land was critically damaged. More than 500 Chileans lost their lives and we will be rebuilding the country for a number of years. However, what I want to highlight here is that immediately following the catastrophe, when many citizens

and towns were without basic services and there was little or no food for all the families who have lost their homes, many women led the way in finding solutions for their community. It was very moving to see hundreds of women coming together to meet the needs of those around them and that is also the same in Haiti, where women were really were the fundamental leaders on how to confront all these damages of Haiti's earthquake and that is what I call true leadership.

There is much more to do in Chile, in the rest of Latin America and in the rest of the world where numerous forms of discrimination still persist. In practice, many women are unable to fully exercise their rights and have unequal access to opportunities. However, my outlook is optimistic. My own experience has shown that women can make our voices heard and make an ever greater impact on our nations of taking towards a more just, social order. We have to work hard so that democracy becomes deeply rooted in our regions so there can be more freedom for all. We, the women of the world, have to make sure that institutions are placed at the service of the community. All of this will lead to gender equality and women empowerment.

I will also like to insist that women leadership must be absolutely inclusive and take on a humanist stance in society. Economic growth is important but shared progress and greater cultures of solidarity are important as well. Women have the conviction that our outlook, our specific sensibility and reasoning based on dialogue and consensus-building will be highly advantageous for societies. Women can make major contributions to public life, to development, and must stand up and be ready for the challenges ahead.

That is why I am committed to the cause of gender equality. You can count on me to continue struggling for a better world for all.