

# Fifth World Assembly for Women: WAW! 2019/ Women 20 (W20)

Statement by Michelle Bachelet,  
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Tokyo, 23 March 2019

Prime Minister Abe,

Mrs. Abe,

Distinguished co-Chairs,

Dear Gabriela, Vice-President Michetti,

Dear Malala Yousafzai,

Excellencies, Colleagues, Friends,

Ohayo gozaimasu,

It is an honour to speak to the World Assembly for Women, and to participate in this country's effort to achieve a society "where women shine". I also appreciate your decision to twin this work with Women 20, to drive a strong and concerted policy message to the G20 Summit in June. And I want to make a public acknowledgement of what the Women 20 has meant. Hasn't been

for all the women, working for some years, pushing for the gender agenda in the G20 Summit, we would be even worse than now.

So, let's give applause for all of these efforts for Women 20.

Thinking of the Summit, of course, there are clear resolutions that come from the world where you have been doing, but let me suggest some ideas:

The planet belongs to all of us.

If you, the leaders of the G-20 countries, want to achieve sustainable development, then you must empower girls and women.

If you want to end inequalities, and poverty, free girls to make their own choices.

If you want to improve governance, and boost stability, tear down the obstacles, which hold back women's participation.

If you want to fulfill the promise of peaceful societies, make sure women are at the table.

To address climate change effectively – by influencing how we eat, how we produce, how we build, how we move, how we manage waste – then uphold women's rights.

If you want to fight terrorism effectively, and shape secure societies, educate girls; make sure women can participate fairly, and fully, in society.

Make women part of your solutions. Or you will fail. Because gender equality is not only about justice for billions of women and girls. It is the precondition for meeting the challenges of promoting resilient and sustainable development and building good governance.

Whether we are talking about the health of the planet, or development. Or conflict. Or inequalities. From office jobs and care facilities to the corporate boardroom. From the most remote communities to the heights of national power. From the street

and the school to the diffuse and powerful digital space. Because this is not only about the challenges which face the leaders of the G-20 countries. It is about every kind of social structure, political gathering and economic organisation.

So in all these contexts, this is our message:

If there is no justice for half the population of our countries, then we will not solve our problems – we will just make them worse.

Distinguished participants,

Discrimination against women is pervasive across the world. And in every society, it is rooted in specific histories and multi-faceted characteristics. But in general, gender discrimination is grounded in stereotypes that are limiting, and often demeaning, and shaped by a view that women should be bound to the service of a society whose goals and approach are dominated by men.

In the Asia-Pacific region, as in many parts of the world, women are unjustly held back from full participation in the economy, in

politics, and in social and cultural life. Many women are robbed of their dignity and their right to make their own choices; they are silenced, exploited, preyed upon and both physically and virtually, subjected to attack.

The humiliation of women who speak up online is rampant, and unjustly trivialised by policy-makers, institutions of justice and the police. Sexual violence is also frequently minimised by officials at all levels across the world. In conflict situations, sexual violence has been extensive and devastating, with many victims targeted based on their perceived ethnic, religious, political or clan affiliation. Migrant women and girls are also at high risk of gender-based violence.

This discrimination, and oppression, harms millions of individual women and girls. It holds them back and robs them of the full realisation of their rights. But that isn't all. Gender discrimination harms all of society. It holds everyone back. It is an obstacle to the full realisation of everyone's life.

Let me take a closer look at some economic issues first, because the economic empowerment of women and girls can profoundly change social dynamics and unleash tremendous transformation – which is why it is among the core goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Currently, over 2.7 billion women are legally restricted from having the same choice of jobs as men, according to a report by the World Bank last year. Billions more are deprived of fair access to education and training, or trapped in low-level jobs with low pay and few prospects for career growth, because of social attitudes and discrimination within companies. Moreover, as the #MeToo movement, and many individual incidents have demonstrated, workplace sexual harassment is rampant in every part of the world, yet another impediment to women's economic participation.

Research suggests that if women could fully participate in the global economy, they would contribute up to 28 trillion dollars to annual global GDP within ten years – a 26% increase compared with a business-as-usual scenario.

At every level, from small private companies to vast multinational corporations, key actors need to ask whether we can afford to maintain women's position on the margins of economic and financial leadership.

I think the answer is obvious: we cannot. Empowering women unlocks economic potential at every level in society – from the State, through private companies and state-run enterprises, to individual women, their families and their communities.

I want to be clear: by "economic empowerment", I do not just mean we should increase the number of women in labour force, while the larger vision of the roles of both women and men remains strictly, and tightly, limited by social restrictions.

Full economic empowerment requires a social transformation, so that both women and men can fully and equally exercise their human rights, and make their own choices.

**Women will truly be empowered – able to develop their full potential, and "shine" – when they can fully exercise their human rights and make their own decisions, in dignity and autonomy, at home, at work and in public decision-making.**

How can we achieve that?

Laws and policies matter. **Women's equality needs to be guaranteed by law and supported by policies.** An important World Bank report issued last month entitled "Women, Business and the Law" shows that countries which reformed their laws for gender equality significantly increased women's participation in the labour force.

It suggests that crucial areas for legislation include the protection of women's rights to freedom of movement; non-discrimination in access to work; freedom from sexual harassment at work, and from domestic violence; equal pay; equality in marriage; prohibition of discrimination based on pregnancy; entitlement to parental leave; equality in legal capacity; recognition of unpaid

work; and equality in social protection issues, such as retirement and pension.

Many countries have some laws and policies aimed at reducing the gender gap in economic participation. But in most countries, this more fundamental legal equality is not yet fully in place. According to the report, only 6 countries have achieved full gender equality in law.

Furthermore, although laws are important, they need to be grounded in an enabling environment. This means shifting and dismantling the often deeply rooted stereotypes which underpin gender inequality and discrimination, including unconscious bias. Typically, stereotypes view women's roles as primarily caring for children and the elderly within family homes. Globally, despite some progress over recent decades, women do more than three-quarters of the world's unpaid care work, according to the ILO. In the Asia-Pacific region, they do more than four times the amount of unpaid care work that men do.

This undermines the possibilities for women to pursue career development on equal footing with men, and it increases the risk they will become economically dependent. These stereotypes also limit the life-choices of men and boys – putting pressure on them to bear the sole responsibility for earning an income, skewing their work-life balance and subjecting them to excessive working hours.

In this region, where societies are aging at an unprecedented pace and there is increasing need for good care for older people, it will be crucial – for sustainable development, for social harmony and for well-being across every demographic and economic category – to rethink domestic responsibilities; care responsibilities; social services and social protection issues.

You may be aware of the ILO's Global Flagship Programme on Building Social Protection Floors for All. This is also a key human rights priority. Investing in social protection programmes is vital to achieving gender equality within a economy that marshals dynamism by strengthening the human rights of all.

Countries do not have to be wealthy to set up important and effective social protection programmes. When I was President of Chile, I managed many complex economic challenges – many of them linked to the sharp ups and downs of the global economy, and their impact on people in difficult situations, including many women. We managed to carry out reforms to the pension system, with redistribution and coverage to ensure that the most marginalized people, including women, could count on a basic salary. This had many important and positive effects – not limited to the many individual beneficiaries whose rights we upheld.

Even the very poorest countries can afford universal social protection systems that include universal maternity coverage. The ILO has shown that a universal social protection system which includes maternity benefits for all women with new-borns; allowances for all children; benefits for all persons with severe disabilities; and universal old-age pensions can cost an average of 1.6 per cent of GDP.. And this kind of social protection system, grounded in a human rights-based and gender-sensitive approach, helps to free women from the poverty trap, as well as driving a transformation of gender stereotypes and gender relations.

Excellencies,

**There is absolutely no room for gender-based violence at work, including sexual violence and sexual harassment in the**

**workplace.** Far more needs to be done to address these issues.

Sexual violence and harassment are a major obstacle to women entering and remaining in the workforce, and have significant negative impact on women's rights and health. The prevalence of these forms of violence is high, and women's demands for justice are too often minimized, mocked and dismissed.

Addressing violence and harassment in the workplace requires a concerted and determined effort to change workplace culture. Vague verbal commitments are no longer sufficient to address these issues – and to be honest, they never were. There should be zero tolerance for the contempt and abuse of women in this way, from the highest level of national power in every country, to the shops and offices of every town, and the fields and rural agribusiness facilities where so many women are employed. Verbal abuse and physical harassment are linked, and eliminating both

will require firm, transparent and comprehensive measures to ensure that when such abuses occur, the perpetrators are held accountable.

To shape the policies which will effectively address these and other issues, **we need much greater participation of women and girls in decision-making, and in politics.** For centuries, men have claimed to speak for women: that doesn't work.

But "women" is a very broad category – half the population cannot be described adequately with one word. We need representation of women with diverse backgrounds and characteristics – including age, social and economic status, disability, ethnicity, geography, religion, gender identity and so on. There may be a need for a transitional measure to rectify profound historical inequality.

In Chile, four years ago, we adjusted the electoral system to ensure that women candidates would make up at least 40 per cent of the people seeking elected office. To be honest, I wanted 40 percent elected, but I didn't win that battle, I have to say. This

was not the only battle that I lost, but this was a very important one. The subsequent election to the lower house of Congress saw an almost 7% increase in women Deputies. In the first election since this measure was adopted, the ratio of women to men in parliament increased 10%.

Prime Minister Abe was mentioning about women at the board of enterprises. We had the same problem. We said to ourselves how could we convince private sectors to do that, first start by home. We decided when I arrived at my second government in 2014 when we had only 4 to 5 percent of women directors on board at state owned enterprises, we put a target, that by the end of the government, there should be 40 percent of women directors. Then we had shown to the private sectors this could be done, and this could be useful and very good for the economy. I have to say that I ended my government with 42 percent; so, this really can be done.

Concrete action and strong leadership for systemic change yields results. I know Japan has also passed a law on election quotas last

year. I hope this will be a very important step and more for women's participation.

Excellencies,

No discussion of the world's challenges can fail to address the pressing dangers of climate change. This is particularly urgent in the case of a conference on women, because climate change intensifies existing vulnerabilities, and is therefore especially devastating to women and girls.

Natural disasters, such as extreme storms and increasing sea levels, like we have just seen in Africa such as in Mozambique, Mali and Uganda, destroy homes, livelihoods and communities. Compounded with gender inequality, they may particularly expose women to greater physical, economic and social hardship, including displacement, and reduced access to vital services or work. In countries in fragile contexts, women and girls affected by climate disasters may face increased risks of child marriage and trafficking.

Other, less sudden manifestations of climate change -- such as frequent droughts, or warming oceans – affect water sources and biodiversity, and erode fertile land. They, too, may hit women first, since most small scale agriculture is done by women.

Clearly, strategies to respond to climate change must have women's needs at their core. More than ever, we need women's voices today to contribute to good policy and sound governance.

And indeed, across the world, many women and girls are raising their voices as activists. As citizens, students, workers, the leaders of communities and businesses, journalists, academics, parliamentarians, and in every other role, they seek to defend the rights of their communities, and of us all, by raising human rights abuses and violations and demanding justice.

As Malala, she was very young, starting to call for the right of girls' education; or as Greta, the 15-year-old Swedish girl who is challenging and striking on the street to call for action for climate change.

We need women's voices. We need to ensure that gender is not a barrier to equal opportunities to all levels in all fields of life. We need to do this, because women matter. Each individual who is unfairly held back suffers profound injustice.

We need to do this because freeing women to enjoy their full human rights, in equality and dignity, is the key that can unlock better decisions, for a better world.

I thank you.