

REMARKS BY JOSÉ LUIS MACHINEA,
EXECUTIVE SECRETARY OF THE ECONOMIC COMMISSION
FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN,
AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE TENTH SESSION
OF THE REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON WOMEN IN
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

The Honourable Rafael Correa, President of the Republic of Ecuador,
The Honourable Michelle Bachelet, President of the Republic of Chile,
Mrs. María Teresa Fernández de la Vega, First Vice-President and Minister
for the Presidency of Spain,
Mrs. María Fernanda Espinosa, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic
of Ecuador,
Distinguished Ministers,
Representatives of States members of ECLAC,
Representatives of organizations in the United Nations system, in particular,
Mrs. Rachel Mayanja, Assistant-Secretary-General and Special Adviser to
the Secretary-General on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women,
Mrs. Ndioro Ndiaye, Deputy Director-General of the International
Organization for Migration,
Representatives of international organizations with offices in the Republic of
Ecuador,
National authorities,
Representatives of non-governmental organizations and civil society,
Mrs. Soledad Puente, Director of the National Women's Council of the
Republic of Ecuador (CONAMU),
Mrs. Sonia Montaña, Chief, Women and Development Unit, ECLAC,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I should like to begin, Mr. President, by thanking your Government for its invitation to hold the tenth session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean here in Ecuador. In particular, we wish to thank the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Women's Council (CONAMU), whose efficient enthusiasm and invaluable collaboration in all necessary areas have enabled us to reach this point.

Ecuador has played a role in many significant events in the advancement of women in the region. Its representative served as the deputy chairperson for the sixth session of the Regional Conference on Women and to date, retains the title of rapporteur for the ninth session and subsequent meetings of the Presiding Officers. I am confident that your leadership, Mr. President, which has been reflected, among other things, in a sharp increase in the number of women in your cabinet --transforming your country into one of the most advanced in the region in this respect-- will make itself felt in the coming years in ways that will benefit women, men and Ecuadorian society in general.

I should like also to extend a very warm welcome to the delegations of member countries and associate member countries of ECLAC, the representatives of participating non-governmental organizations and the representatives of civil society that are attending along with the official delegations of countries, in particular young, indigenous and Afro-descendant women.

In addition, I wish to express my appreciation to the United Nations specialized agencies represented here today for their support and active participation in the organization of the Conference. This joint work strengthens inter-agency collaboration in the region in areas as varied as statistics, the environment, fostering social cohesion, combating violence against women and promoting respect for human rights.

This Conference focuses on two issues: political participation and gender parity in decision-making processes at all levels, and contribution of women to the economy and social protection, especially in relation to unpaid work. Both topics are vital, not only to gender policies, but also to sectoral policies and those that have an impact on economic growth, poverty alleviation and social cohesion.

In terms of broadening the scope of citizenship and legitimizing democracy, parity will call for renewed efforts to ensure that women are represented in all spheres of decision-making. As far as the internal democratization of political parties and opening up of electoral systems are concerned, much ground remains to be covered.

Nevertheless, we have witnessed recently a significant advance in the participation of women in the executive branch; women are increasingly making inroads in ministries that were traditionally the preserve of men; the election of women to the most senior post in some of our countries constitutes a cultural change of tremendous magnitude. I wish particularly to applaud President Michelle Bachelet, who, in establishing parity within her government and adopting policies of equality that are worthy of emulation,

has been a source of inspiration for the agenda of this regional Conference. In addition, the participation of María Teresa Fernández de la Vega, First Vice-President and Minister for the Presidency of Spain, is cause for immense satisfaction. In supporting democratic development in the region, she has been instrumental in incorporating gender equality as a central element of cooperation and this has been reflected in programmes for poverty eradication, democratic governance and the elimination of violence against women.

Today, we are witness to the appointment of women to cabinet posts on the basis of their own merit and their election to public posts on the strength of their ability to lead; their talent can thus be used to enhance the exercise of power. As in the case of men, the performance of women is subjected to public scrutiny and, little by little, the stereotypes, which either associate women with all the virtues or else discredit them for not having a male style of leadership, are being called into question. Both stereotypes are forms of discrimination and prejudice which can only be eliminated when the governing elites put an end to the exclusion of women.

Various studies attest to the fact that women tend to become politically active later than men, once their children have grown up; among women in political posts, there is also a higher proportion of single and separated women and, generally speaking, such women have fewer children than their male counterparts, who usually have a wife at home to look after the children.

The fact that women are obliged to take care of the family and ensure social reproduction is one of the factors that hinders their participation on an equal basis. In lower-income sectors in particular, women are forced to obtain a paid job in order to support their family; they also have to take responsibility for caregiving tasks, in which men tend not to get involved, and, in addition, they need to develop a broad social net in order to have access to the social programmes geared to vulnerable groups. Studies have revealed, however, that the leaders that emerge in the implementation of such programmes do not manage to make the transition to the spheres of national or regional policy.

The second theme that concerns us, “analysis of the contribution of women to the economy and social protection, especially in relation to unpaid work performed by women”, is crucial for the development of our countries. For a long time, access by women to paid employment in the labour market was considered a symbol of progress. Indeed, it usually is in the case of families that benefit from the advantages deriving from this access and which therefore have a better chance of overcoming poverty and enjoying a better quality of life. The problem arises when societies fail to adopt measures to alleviate the total work burden of women, when housework is not taken into account in the design of social protection policies and when the society does not take the necessary steps to strengthen women’s economic autonomy, understood as the capacity to generate their own income under decent conditions.

The existing sexual division of labour is a factor that clearly hinders progress towards equality. Policies that promote shared responsibility

between men and women in caring for household members, especially children, must be formulated as a matter of priority. I am sure you will all agree on this point as well as on the need for greater public action (by the State and the business sector) in providing care for the sick, the elderly and the disabled.

It is not only in their own family that women bear the burden of caregiving. Indeed, many women (the poorest and those with less education, in particular, indigenous and Afro-descendant women) leave their own homes to work in someone else's, where they earn low wages and are expected to put in long working hours, in most cases without a contract or social security. The situation of domestic workers poses an inescapable challenge to the political authorities, parliaments and Latin American and Caribbean society as a whole.

Globalization also brings other new challenges. The phenomenon of emigration has been escalating and more and more women are leaving their children to the care of grandmothers, sisters or female neighbours to work in conditions that prove to be substandard when compared with those that obtain for nationals of the host countries. This has an obvious impact on the economy, as a result of the remittances sent back to the home country, but it raises new challenges in terms of social protection and highlights the need to study in greater depth the question of the “transnationalization of care”.

There is mounting evidence of the fact that with a clear political will and effective public policies it is possible to move forward towards the

achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, particularly goal 3, which is “to promote gender equality and empower women”.

ECLAC will continue to work tirelessly to further and support the adoption of fairer and more effective policies designed to achieve equality between women and men. We will also remain steadfast in our commitment to strengthen the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean as a forum where countries can meet and share experiences but, first and foremost, as an authority that can contribute to the adoption of measures on the basis of those commitments.

Advances must be made towards democratization of political parties and electoral systems. But governments also need to have at their disposal studies that provide an accurate estimate of the contribution of unpaid housework to the economy of each country and, especially, an analysis that can be used as a basis for designing public policies that provide social protection for persons engaged in unpaid housework.

You have my assurance of the Commission’s willingness to perform all of these tasks.

Mr. President, once again, may I express our gratitude to you and your people for the warm welcome extended to us. Thank you to each participant for attending and I wish you every success in your deliberations.

Thank you.