

High-Level Regional Symposium: Sustaining Responses on Gender Equality in the ECOWAS Region



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Address of Executive Director Michelle Bachelet to the High-Level Regional Symposium: Sustaining Responses on Gender Equality in the ECOWAS Region, Accra, Ghana, 13 September 2011.

Excellencies, Distinguished representatives, colleagues and friends,

It is my pleasure to address you today at this important symposium on sustaining gender equality in West Africa.

UN Women is pleased to join the other sponsors of this meeting and we are pleased to be working with all of you to advance women's empowerment and gender equality in the ECOWAS region.

I would also like to congratulate you as members of the African Union for declaring this decade the decade for women.

The 21st century is the time for women's rights and gender equality. Now is the time for women's full participation. This is a matter of full citizenship and democracy, and this is why gender equality should be prioritized by all governments worldwide.

Yes, women's empowerment is a goal in its own right and it is also a driver to achieve all development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals, to which the world's governments have committed.

Ending extreme poverty and hunger, improving women's and children's health, combating AIDS, and ensuring universal education all depend in large part on the progress that is made by and for women and girls.

As you gather at this symposium to sustain gender equality in West Africa, you are guided by the ECOWAS Gender Policy that was adopted in 2004 by the council of Ministers from the 15 ECOWAS Member States.

In this Gender Policy, you agreed to expand and promote the gender parity principle, to strengthen institutional frameworks for the promotion and protection of all human rights for women and girls, and to actively promote the implementation of legislation to guarantee women's rights.

Yet we see that despite stated commitments and partnerships, large gaps remain when it comes to women's economic, social and political participation, and the protection of women's human rights. As experts in the field, you know very well what the gaps are, and you also know some of the successes that have been achieved through strengthening programmes and budgets for gender equality.

You know the value of building partnerships between ministries and between public and private sectors and with civil society to advance women's rights. And you know the importance of monitoring public planning and budget processes to keep track of and to bolster progress.

Today I encourage the United Nations family and other development partners to not only fully support gender equality but to make it a top priority. I encourage you to support the strengthening of institutional frameworks, the expansion of opportunities for women's empowerment, the increase of women's political participation and efforts to address violence against girls and women.

Investing in girls and women is not only the right thing to do, it is also the smart thing to do. It is a solid investment that brings high returns. The World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report found that in 134 countries with data, greater gender equality correlates with a higher gross national product.

UN WOMEN together with the UN family joins the Government of Ghana and the entire ECOWAS Community in our commitment to advance gender equality in West Africa.

We recognize the strategic role of the Ministries of Finance and Planning, the private sector, civil society, and regional bodies in sustaining gender equality responses. And we believe that your partnership and participation at this symposium will serve to define a concrete and binding strategy

that will serve, in a very real and practical way, to advance women's empowerment, women's rights and gender equality in this region.

I wish you much success at this meeting. UN Women stands by you and we will continue to stand by you in carrying forward your agreed strategy, and in transforming the words on paper into bold action to make gender equality a shared and living reality.

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