

**11th General Assembly of the Parliamentary Confederation of the Americas (COPA), and
the 10th Annual Meeting of the Network of Women Parliamentarians of the Americas**

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“Women’s commitment to a better future: Water, poverty and sustainable development.”

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The right honourable minister, Your Excellencies, Honourable Members of Parliament, My colleagues from UN Headquarters and distinguished guests

I would like to express my humble and profuse thanks to COPA for the honor and privilege accorded to me to address, politicians and parliamentarians from 35 countries.

As a woman, and also as a humanitarian, the cause of gender equality movements, and the special role that Parliamentarians have to play in ensuring the eradication of injustices against girls and Women in their countries, deeply resonates with my mandate, as the President of United Nations Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women National Committee in Canada. Two months ago I had the privilege of addressing Parliamentarians at the Inter-parliamentary Forum of the Americas at the Dominican Republic on the importance of the Political and Leadership Role that Women Parliamentarians can play across the Americas.

I believe that our constant dialogue with parliamentarians from the Americas should not go unrecognized because the legislative bodies of almost all the countries from North, Central and South America are working passionately and rigorously to balance the scales of gender inequity that exists in their respective countries.

I would like to begin by offering a tribute to the numerous parliamentarians and politicians who work tirelessly with international bodies and civil society organizations to accelerate the implementation of gender sensitive programs from gender-based budgeting to national training programs for women's education, women's health clinics and other social policies to integrate women into the political decision-making process

Many years have passed since the Beijing Platform for Action, CEDAW and the United Nations Charter for Human Rights were ratified and adopted. The agreement of these conventions signalled a move by governments in the Americas that they were ready to commit to a just and a progressive future for women and men as equal beneficiaries of humanitarian development. Given the large span of time since these important legal instruments, it is the time now to evaluate our performance in attaining gender equality - a task that still remains incomplete in the world, in our

region and in our respective countries.

It is a known fact that a significant proportion of women in the Americas live below the poverty line and they have not benefited from the process of globalization, resulting in a further "feminization of poverty". The performance of many countries on water and sanitation related issues are also poor because most women are excluded and deprived of this basic human necessity of water.

Access to clean water for daily use remains an overwhelming challenge for women in villages and cities alike across the Americas. As the economies of various countries of the Americas are expanding, we are witnessing swathes of urban and rural growth, yet these development successes are not entirely based on a sustainable footing and thus the economic and gender equality progress that we have attained remains fragile.

Water is the essence of life. Safe drinking water and sanitation are indispensable to sustain life and health, and fundamental to the dignity of all. Yet, 884 million people do not have access to improved sources of drinking water, while 2.5 billion lack access to improved sanitation facilities. While these numbers shed light on a worrying situation, the reality is much worse, as millions of poor people living in informal settlements are simply missing from national statistics. The roots of the current water and sanitation crisis can be traced to poverty, inequality and unequal power relationships, and it is exacerbated by social and environmental challenges: accelerating urbanization, climate change, and increasing pollution and depletion of water resources.

In order to address this crisis, the international community has increasingly recognized that access to safe drinking water and sanitation must be considered within a human rights framework.

Consequently, the theme that I would like to address today centers around the current state of access to water, feminized poverty and sustainable development in the Americas and how can Parliamentarians and Governments of over 40 countries, along with assistance from international bodies such as the United Nations, ensure their commitment to a better future for women and girls.

Let us first look at the state of poverty in the Americas and what we are doing presently and what more can be done about this phenomenon to ensure our commitment to women.

The United Nations defines poverty as "a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity, lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society." From Lima, Guadalajara, New York City to Montreal, women across the Americas are caught in the web of economic insecurity. Many women in developed and developing countries still don't have enough to feed and clothe a family, pursue an education, or access medical services.

Due to the gender inequities across the Americas, poverty brings along with it insecurity, powerlessness and the exclusion of individual women, their households and entire communities. These crippling effects of poverty in the Americas also translates into susceptibility of women to gender-based violence, sexual abuse, prostitution, human trafficking, drugs, crime and a host of other issues where women are easily implicated due to their fragile and voiceless state in American societies.

In the 2010 UN World's Women Trends and Statistics Report, the results on feminized poverty are truly disheartening. With regards to poverty, the key findings of the report reveal that women are more likely to be poor than men. Fewer women than men have cash income in less developed regions, and a significant proportion of women have no say in how cash earnings are spent.

In terms of work and the labour force, women are often disadvantaged when compared to men with respect to access to employment opportunities and conditions of work. All too often, women have to forego employment simply because of family responsibilities and women have many barriers to upward mobility in their careers due to hetero-patriarchal attitudes of the bureaucracy.

In 2010, women's participation in the labour force was at 52%. For men, on the other hand, the participation rate was at 77%. In the Caribbean and Latin America, great improvements have been made between 1990 and 2010, but there is still much work to be done.

These statistics only touch the surface of women's experience with poverty in the Americas. A thorough analysis of the statistical data tell us that parliamentarians in the region are making progress towards creating a strong future for women by eradicating poverty. It is only through the impetus provided by decision-makers and Parliamentarians such as those gathered here that our countries can realize women's potential and eradicate gender-based poverty.

I would also like to mention that advancing women's economic security and rights has always been a fundamental priority of UN Women. UN Women and its predecessor UNIFEM has, through the years, supported many governments of the Americas to reshape conditions for women at both ends of the economic spectrum, from boosting women's participation in economic policy-making to supporting efforts to provide women and their communities with practical skills needed for securing sustainable livelihoods.

It should be highlighted that in more than 40 countries of the Americas, UN Women supported national and local initiatives to include gender perspectives in budgeting processes, and to collect and use sex-disaggregated data in public policy formulation to ensure that macro-economic policy frameworks address women's priorities.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, great strides have been made by Governments in association with UN Women to empower the economic rights of women and to eradicate gender based poverty that was a result of archaic laws that prevented women's participation in acquiring control of land and their inheritance. For example; in Bolivia, the Law of Popular Participation, established in assistance from UN Women, resulted in the Instituto de Formación Femenina Integral (IFFI) of Cochabamba, that mobilized and trained members of local women's organizations to bring in gender perspectives into local public policies, specifically, policies that obliged municipalities to allocate budgetary resources to programs that promote gender equality and to provide services for women's victims of violence. Presently, this model of popular participation has been extended from Bolivia to many other South American countries.

Parliamentarians and international bodies such as UN Women have played a significant role in working towards the abolishment of gender based poverty. In light of the current situation, efforts to alleviate poverty remain unfinished. Today, I encourage all parliamentarians here to make a

robust commitment to women and to continue our consultations with international organizations such as UN Women and the civil society networks in their regions to accelerate the pace of change and ensure the alleviation of feminized poverty in the Americas.

As mentioned earlier, the issue of poverty is not the only issue that challenges and makes us question our commitment to women of the Americas. Access to water or its lack thereof, is so critical to gender equality due to the fact that in many cultures, women and men have different roles surrounding the responsibility of the use and management of water.

In urban areas of the Americas, women can wait in line for hours to collect water at pipes. In mountainous or desert areas women may need to walk many kilometers to fetch water, sometimes through areas where they are vulnerable to physical or sexual assault.

Studies have shown that the activity of collecting water by women can take up as much as 25% of their time, leaving little time for women's involvement in other activities like education, income generation, cultural or political involvement or simple rest and recreation. These women are deprived of the means that can allow them to contribute to their communities.

Perhaps the worst impact that lack of access to clean water has on women is the toll it takes on a woman's personal health and that of her family. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 80% of all sickness in the world is due to unsafe water and sanitation. Water-borne diseases kill 3.4 million people, mostly children, per year. Many more get preventable diseases like diarrhoea, malaria, arsenic poisoning, or hepatitis, simply because they don't have access to clean water.

Parliamentarians and Governments of the Americas need to engage in consultations with women's groups and explore initiatives that improve access to clean water and sanitation systems in impoverished communities.

The implementation of clean water and sanitation programs by the Governments of the Americas can greatly decrease rates of death and illness and improve the quality of life for millions of people.

The overall benefit of clean water and sanitation is not only beneficial for women but to their entire communities, families and economies at large. As a matter of fact, the cost-benefit analysis by the WHO Water Programme indicates that every US\$1 invested in improving access to clean water and sanitation could see a return on investment of US\$5 and US\$11. Thus, improving access of clean water to women is the smart thing to do for economic growth of countries especially in tumultuous economic times as the present recession.

UN Women attempts to mainstream gender as a part of sustainable water and sanitation programs that are vital given the disproportionate effect these issues have on women. It is clear that women are at the centre of the negative results of water contamination and must therefore be at the crux of the solutions.

Including women in any solutions is highly beneficial because women have a deep understanding of the costs and concerns surrounding access to clean and sustainable water sources. Women's voices must be heard in the processes that decide if and how water is provided in their communities. Water privatization has been the solution in many communities where governments are unable to provide the necessary infrastructure, but along with privatization may come prohibitive costs and therefore community consultation is necessary for these systems to be sustainable solutions.

It is precisely due to the gender dimensions of access to water that in 2006 in Paz, Bolivia UNIFEM and Fundación Solón organized a meeting called "Women in Defense of Water" as a forum for women activists to discuss water privatization and their own experiences. The women created a proposal that defined water as a fundamental human right which therefore could not be privatized and Government officials committed to promoting the proposal in their respective fields

Including women throughout the process of developing water and sanitation facilities can mean minor changes that have big impacts for the betterment of countries of the Americas.

These insights can in turn be used by Parliamentarians gathered here to strengthen their respective country's commitment to a better future for women by helping create legislation and policies that empower women and their communities create more efficient and useful systems of water management.

Sustainable development is impossible without sustainable equality between women and men. An understanding of gender equality and women's empowerment through a sustainable development lens is necessary in order to ensure our commitment to a better future for women.

It is for this reason that UN Women believes that implementing the requisite mechanisms and strategies to achieve viable results for women's empowerment with countries and Parliaments of the Americas needs to keep sustainable development and its intersection with alleviation of poverty and access to clean water always in mind.

While progress has been made, there remains much work to be done in order to create viable, sustainable, gender equal communities.

As you all are aware, some of the most blatant injustices against women and their deprivation of economic and water rights are occurring across the America's due to their lack of political underrepresentation in the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament. Furthermore, institutional barrier and feminization of poverty also hinder the promise of progress for gender equality as most women cannot even run for political office as effectively compared to their male counterparts due to their low economic status and lack of social security.

Women all across the countries in the Americas and the Caribbean continue to suffer from discrimination, their voices are missing from economic decisions made by parliamentarians and Executives in the board rooms surrounding negotiations on pay, the economy and land and water rights legislation. As the entire picture of these human rights injustice and discrimination of women's human rights unfolds, the world watches in silence!

Research shows that in 24 major economic processes effecting citizens of Latin American countries over the past two decades, women formed less than 8 percent of negotiating teams.

We as Parliamentarians, civil society advocates and leaders gathered here today have to purport for advancement of fair play for women in work , legislature, board rooms and the economic affairs our countries.

I urge all Parliamentarians gathered here today to take my message of gender equality to your respective ridings and attempt to work with respective UN Women regional offices in their countries to forge an agenda that identifies expanding women's voice, leadership and participation, and enhancement of women's economic empowerment as central national and local priorities via gender-sensitive budgeting and other innovative mechanisms.

I also encourage parliamentarians gathered here today to try align themselves with the UN system to support women in politics as decision makers by providing girls and women of tomorrow the skill-set and education in participatory, responsive and inclusive politics through parliamentary mentorship programmes in legislatures across the Americas so that better policies pertaining to women's poverty, access to water and sustainable development are enacted with women as key-players in decision-making acumen.

The creation of the entity UN Women and the important initiative undertaken by Parliamentarians such as you at COPA presents a glimmer of hope for women of the Americas and the Caribbean.

We as women, men and legislators have to keep the flame for gender equality burning and bring light and justice to those less fortunate girls & women that are suffering from discrimination in employment, deprivation of their educational rights and are victims of an unfair wage gap in the economic recession along with patriarchy.

As you can see from these brief remarks, the UN Women agenda is an ambitious one — as it needs to be. In meeting our goals, working in a consultative relationship with the COPA will be critical. In this regard, I also welcome the decision by COPA to graciously sponsor the UN Women Canada launch in Quebec City and am optimistic that that we can forge a synergistic relationship and accomplish many milestones in the near future in the realm of gender equality

Today, I hope that all Parliamentarians gathered at the 11th National Assembly take something inspirational from my address so that together we can add momentum to ensure that any legislation or initiatives that are in progress in your respective legislatures ensure that they are sustainable and long-term efforts rather than short-term commitments towards realizing our vision of a just and equitable world for women and girls of the Americas. . It is a quest that we all should take, for we will all benefit once we have reached our goal. UN Women is here, ready and willing, to assist you in this endeavour.

Thank you