



WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Women's rights leaders greet Michelle Bachelet in Panama, April 2011.

UNiting Women Around the Globe

by Gowri Vijayakumar

There is something momentous about Michelle Bachelet's appointment as the Executive Director of UN Women. As Chile's first woman president, she is herself an example of the transformative potential of women's political leadership. During her long career, Bachelet fought for reproductive rights and social protection programs for poor women, including a women's pension and public preschools. Now applying her experience in Chile to advance women's agendas globally — her visit to Berkeley came between trips to Somalia and Panama — Bachelet engages in exactly the kinds of transnational partnerships she sees as central to women's mobilization. In her talk for UC Berkeley's Center for Latin American Studies, she argued passionately for

women's potential as powerful agents of social change and appealed to the audience to become champions of women's rights.

Bachelet's appointment comes at a time when, many activists would argue, women's issues have lost precedence on the United Nations agenda. In the last decade, agencies working for gender equality within the UN have been under-funded and relatively marginalized, while attempts at "gender mainstreaming" in the 1990s have materialized more in rhetoric than in practice. Even the UN's own leadership structure has been slow to embrace gender equality — according to the UN Secretary General's office, in 2009 only about 28 percent of the organization's undersecretaries-general were women.



Photo by Fernando Bocanegra/UN Women.

The creation of UN Women at the beginning of this year, with Bachelet as Under-Secretary General for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, thus represents a watershed moment in the history of the UN's relationship with the women's movement. Not only does Bachelet bring deep personal commitment to her position, but she also sends a signal about the UN's reinvigorated commitment to women's issues. UN Women was created in response to decades of advocacy from women's groups around the world. It unites four formerly separate agencies within the UN system and doubles the budget for women's issues to \$500 million. (Although, as she noted to laughter from the audience, she had already accepted the job when she learned that she would have to raise those funds herself.) Fresh from her presidential term in Chile, Bachelet also lends much-needed energy and visibility to the cause of gender equality both within and beyond the UN system.

In her public address, Bachelet articulated her vision for UN Women in the context of deep, ongoing exclusion and gender inequality worldwide. Women often bear the

brunt of poverty and global inequality, while remaining marginalized from political and economic decision-making. The statistics she listed were grim. Women make up 60 to 70 percent of the global poor, 70 percent of the illiterate and 80 percent of the victims of human trafficking. Every year, 350,000 women die of complications from pregnancy and childbirth. In Africa, women make up 80 to 85 percent of the agricultural labor force, yet only 2 percent have land rights and most cannot inherit property. At least 40 percent of women experience gender-based violence at least once in their lifetimes. Rape is commonly used as a weapon of war, but less than 5 percent of post-conflict funds are dedicated to women's empowerment and gender equality. And the number of women in positions of power remains small: only 19 percent of parliamentarians and 10 percent of heads of state worldwide are women. "It's a little bit sad," Bachelet admitted. "But we're not going to cry, we're going to work." Indeed, she insisted on moving beyond tabulations of all the ways women are excluded to focus on their positive potential, saying, "women's

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Photo by Peg Skorpiński.

Students with Michelle Bachelet after her talk at Berkeley, April 2011.

strength, women's industry, women's wisdom are, I think, humankind's greatest untapped resource."

For women to assert their rights in any arena, Bachelet argued, economic autonomy is critical. "When women earn their own income, they can challenge the way decisions are made in the household; they can demand the right to engage in the political arena; they can claim the right to be safe from violence." The benefits of expanding women's economic participation are not limited to women: countries with greater gender equality in the workforce often see faster economic growth than other countries. Bachelet also emphasized the importance of political autonomy, noting that countries with more female political leaders, such as Rwanda, have made impressive social gains.

Bachelet sees UN Women's role in advancing gender equality taking shape around five core principles. First, the organization provides support to national partners; this support can be technical, legal or financial but it is always driven by demand at the national level. Second, UN Women is working across governments to promote global frameworks and agreements for gender equality. While such international commitments are important, Bachelet noted that they are not always implemented at the national level — indeed, 186 countries have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against

Women (CEDAW), but many forms of discrimination persist within national policy. (The U.S. is one of only seven countries that have not ratified this convention.) Thus, international agreements must be accompanied by initiatives that address gender equality more broadly, through ongoing advocacy for women's empowerment — the third core principle of UN Women's operation. Fourth, Bachelet said, her organization will work to promote coherence across various agencies within the UN — not as the "gender police," but rather to provide policy guidance across the system. Finally, UN Women will "act as a global broker... of knowledge and experience." Building networks with universities will play a particularly important role in aligning good practice with the best research.

Bachelet's new role has the potential to redefine the future of women's issues at the UN and around the world. At the global level, she is committed to building broad political alliances among women that emphasize unity across difference. For example, when an audience member asked what she would say to those who argue that women's rights are Western values, she replied that, across a wide variety of cultural contexts, women want to be free from physical and mental violence, pursue opportunities and make their own choices. Bachelet's stance on women's rights reflects a return to globalism in the UN's approach

to women’s issues. In an intellectual history of the UN’s relationship to the women’s movement, Devaki Jain argues that the UN has come “full circle,” beginning with inclusion of women’s rights in the UN agenda, moving into a questioning of the universal category of “woman” and shifting toward the concept of “gender mainstreaming” and finally reclaiming the term “woman” as the basis for broad political solidarities. Bachelet’s universalism fits well with this approach.

Yet Bachelet’s commitment to universal values does not imply a top-down, unilateral perspective on women’s empowerment. Indeed, she insisted that a fundamental task — and a fundamental challenge — she faces in leading UN Women is to coordinate among a variety of stakeholders operating at multiple levels in starkly different regions. In order to function effectively, Bachelet said, UN Women must support local priorities and foster ownership of policy change. Each region requires different kinds of support. Further, in addition to addressing regional differences, she faces the daunting prospect of working with the various sectors of development programming throughout the UN system to create a cohesive, yet multidimensional, strategy for gender equality.

In spite of the challenges, these alliance-building efforts fit perfectly with the broad definition of development that Bachelet has espoused throughout her political career. In her special seminar with students the morning before her public address, Bachelet described a “harmonic concept of development” that extends beyond economic growth to environmental sustainability and social inclusion, underpinned by broad social mobilization and democratic participation. Her view of women’s empowerment is similarly multifaceted. Bachelet’s task is far from straightforward, but she seems more than up for the challenge. It wasn’t surprising that, when an audience member asked, “What are the limits of UN Women’s mandate?” she replied immediately, almost instinctively: “There are no limits.”

Michelle Bachelet, president of Chile from 2006 to 2010, is the Executive Director of UN Women. She spoke for CLAS on April 14, 2011.

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Harley Shaiken interviews Michelle Bachelet on her new role at UN Women, April 2011.

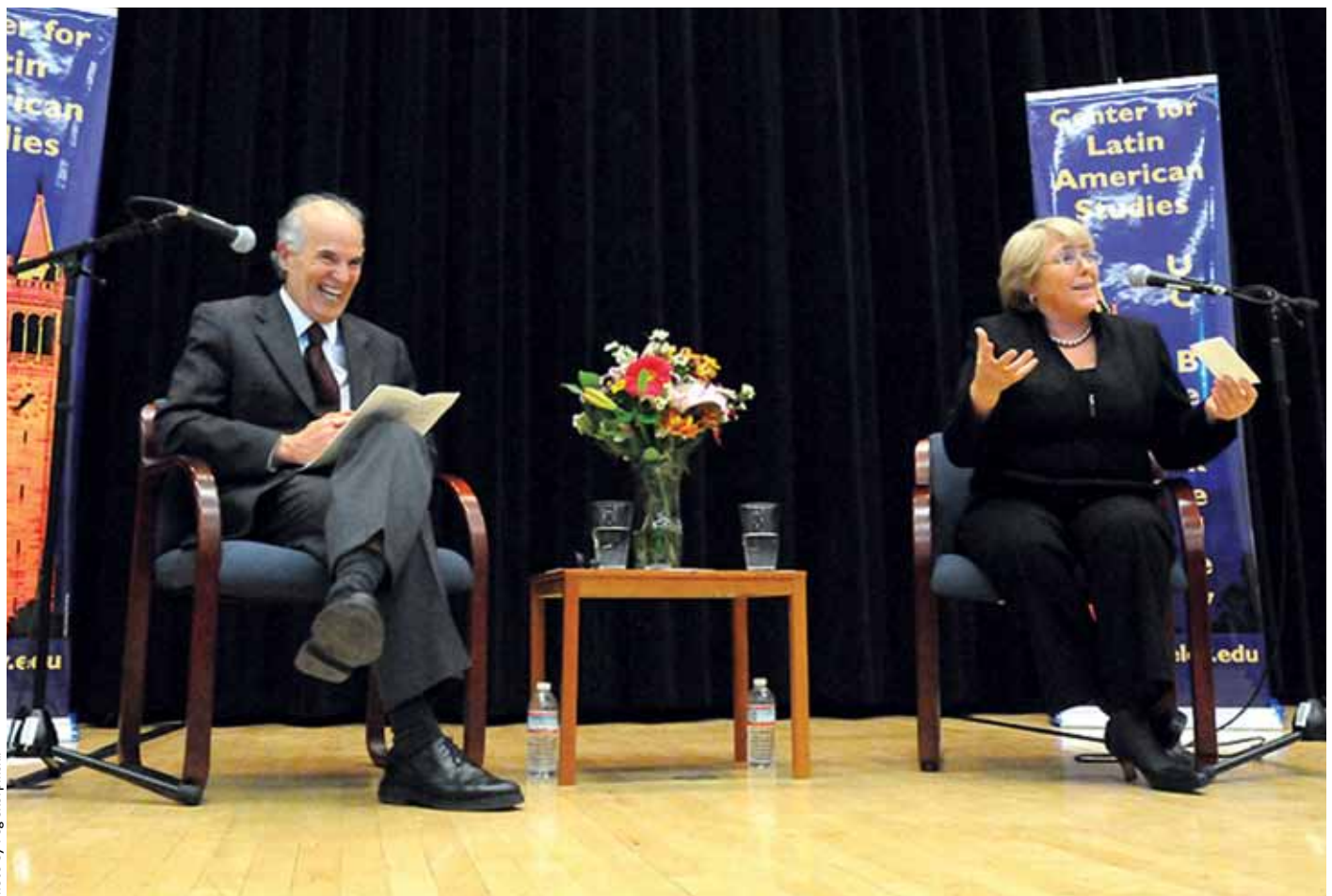


Photo by Peg Skorpinski.