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Michelle Bachelet's Appointment to Head UN Women Widely Applauded

By Daniela Estrada\*

SANTIAGO, Sep 14, 2010 (IPS) - A level of enthusiasm seldom expressed at United Nations appointments welcomed the naming of former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet as the first head of UN Women, the new agency created to raise the profile of gender and women's issues.



Michelle Bachelet Credit: Courtesy of Alex Ibañez/Chilean president's office

Bachelet (2006-2010), a 59-year-old socialist pediatrician and epidemiologist, will formally assume her post, which will also make her a UN under secretary-general, on Sunday Sept. 19.

UN Women -- whose longer name is the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women -- was created on Jul. 2 by the General Assembly and will begin its work on Jan. 1, 2011.

"Bachelet's designation was a cherished hope of the entire Latin American women's movement," Teresa Valdés, the coordinator of the Gender and Equity Observatory of Chile, told IPS.

In his announcement Tuesday in New York, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said "Ms. Bachelet brings to this critical position a history of dynamic global leadership, highly honed political skills and uncommon ability to create consensus and focus among UN agencies and many partners in both the public and private sector.

"I am confident that under her strong leadership, we can improve the lives of millions of women and girls throughout the world," he added.

A rumour had been going around in the past few weeks that Bachelet had declined the offer.

"I gave it a lot of thought," Bachelet said Tuesday in Santiago. "But I accepted because I understood that this task is along the same lines of what my personal history has always been: working for equality, in this case gender equality, for the rights of persons, for social protection, and fighting violence and discrimination."

AIDS-Free World, an international advocacy organisation that works to promote more urgent and effective global responses to HIV/AIDS, applauded the appointment of Bachelet, describing her as "an eminently qualified, effective and respected leader" who has "an unimpeachable record of feminist advocacy in support of women's rights and social justice".

But in a statement signed by Paula Donovan, the organisation had harsh words for the selection process led by Ban, saying "Bachelet's appointment is a rarity at the UN: an excellent outcome emanating from a fundamentally corrupt selection process."

In response to a question from IPS, Ban said the selection process "has been very transparent, and very objective, and fair."

The process began as soon as the General Assembly approved the creation of UN Women, and was opened up to nominations by the member states and civil society, he said.

From a list of "26 distinguished candidates from all around the world," a selection panel chose three finalists, who "I interviewed personally last week," Ban explained.

But in the view of AIDS-Free World, "the search for a strong under secretary-general to lead UN Women was cloaked in furtive secrecy, marred by backroom wheeling and dealing and thoroughly dishonest in its claims of being a 'fair, open and transparent' process with the meaningful involvement of civil society."

Asked by IPS about what he expected Bachelet to accomplish in the medium term, Ban responded that he hoped that under her leadership, UN Women would meet "the expectation of so many millions and millions of women and girls around the world.

"We have a little more than three and a half months," he said. "I will discuss this Sunday, when I appoint her formally, how we can make the process very speedy, so that we can appoint and recruit staff, and we have to have our agendas. Basically we have all these structures in place. Now it is a matter of how we can speedily implement these structures and policy and visions."

The new agency will consolidate four separate entities: the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), and the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI).

UN Women will have a minimum budget of 500 million dollars -- twice the budget of all four former organisations combined. But civil society organisations say one of Bachelet's first tasks is to double that amount.

The appointment of Bachelet indicates that "the new agency has been given the highest possible stature" and "it crowns a political decision that equality must be a central focus; that development is not possible without women," said Valdés, the editor of the book "¿Género en el Poder? El Chile de Michelle Bachelet" (Gender in Power? Michelle Bachelet's Chile), presented Jul. 9.

Her leadership "will help strengthen concern for gender issues in the UN system, because she is closely associated with this issue at the international level," political scientist María de los Ángeles Fernández, who is also writing a book on the former president, told IPS.

"Michelle Bachelet is a top notch choice and has long been one of GEAR's dream candidates," said U.S. activist Charlotte Bunch, a founding member of the Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) Campaign launched by 300 organisations dedicated to promote the creation of a more powerful women's agency.

"An effective leader of great integrity, Bachelet demonstrated strong commitment to women's empowerment and the ability to shape gender equality policies in a variety of areas. She also has the stature to mobilise the resources crucial to make UN Women a success," said Bunch, the founder of the Centre for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

The legacy left by the government of Bachelet -- who was herself arrested, tortured and exiled by the 1973-1990 dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet -- includes both concrete and highly symbolic achievements, analysts say.

Besides naming the first cabinet with gender parity in the Western hemisphere, she gave visibility in her speeches to the gender inequality that persists in Chile.

Her accomplishments include the 2008 reform of the pension system, which introduced a basic pension for poor homemakers who have never earned a wage outside the home, as well as a stipend per child for all mothers.

Another flagship programme of her administration, which has been replicated in other countries in the region, is the Integral Protection System for Early Childhood "Chile Crece Contigo" (Chile Grows with You), which provides support for parents and children from conception through age four.

Other major gains for women under her government include the large number of free day care centres and nursery schools established throughout the country, which have given women more freedom to enter the labour market, and a law aimed at bridging the gender wage gap, which also grants labour benefits to domestic workers.

Bachelet's naming as head of UN Women "is a promising step because it entails recognition of the importance of a woman who set a precedent in Chile," activist Adriana Gómez, with the Articulación Feminista Por la Libertad de Decidir (Feminist Network for the Right to Choose), told IPS.

"But it is also an opportunity for her to acknowledge the 'debts and omissions' of her administration," she added.

Gómez cited, for example, the failure to push through a broad law on sexual and reproductive rights and a law on the decriminalisation of therapeutic abortion, which refers to the termination of a pregnancy when the mother's life is at risk, the foetus is deformed, or the pregnancy is the result of incest or rape.

Despite the fact that under Bachelet, the poverty rate grew slightly in Chile for the first time since 1990, due mainly to the global economic crisis, and in spite of the institutional negligence and shortcomings revealed by the severe February earthquake, she is still the most popular political leader in the country, according to opinion polls.

Although she has stated that running for reelection in 2014 is not in her plans, the hopes of the centre-left Coalition of Parties for Democracy, which governed Chile between 1990 and March this year, to return to power at that time are pinned on her more than on any other leader.

She was even chosen as the best president in the history of Chile in a recent survey.

By accepting the UN appointment, "she is closing the door to the possibility of an immediate return to the political arena, despite the high expectations resting on her shoulders, as the Coalition's most respected political figure," Fernández said.

The former president summed up her decision: "It looked like a wonderful task that I could not turn down."

\* With additional reporting by Aprille Muscara at the United Nations. (END)

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