

**IOI World Conference Keynote Video Message, “The position of women’s rights –how can the Ombudsman contribute towards changes needed in making women’s rights a lived reality in public policy and administration”**

It is my pleasure to speak to you. I send congratulations on the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Office of the Ombudsman in New Zealand.

I thank Beverley Wakem, Chief Ombudsman of New Zealand and President of the International Ombudsman Institute, for inviting me to address all of you today.

Fifty years ago, New Zealand was the fourth country, after Sweden, Finland and Denmark, to establish the office of Ombudsman. Today many countries have adopted the Ombudsman concept as testified by the affiliation of more than 150 national institutions to the International Ombudsman Institute.

On behalf of UN Women, I commend the International Ombudsman Institute for recognizing the evolving role of ombudsmen as a vital mechanism of justice in countries—serving to promote the rule of law, to ensure accountability, and to protect human rights for all.

As ombudspersons, you embody the foundation of a just and democratic society. You are uniquely positioned as intermediaries between the government and the individual to speak out against inequality and exclusion and to facilitate citizens’ access to justice.

This Conference allows us to exchange ideas and share expertise for the development of comprehensive justice systems that guarantee equal rights, equal opportunities, and equal participation.

Today I would like to speak about the position of women’s rights, and how the Ombudsman can contribute to the changes needed in making women’s rights a lived reality in public policy and administration.

In recent decades, we have seen a transformation in the legal rights of women in countries around the world. Since it entered into force 31 years ago, 187 States have ratified the legally binding Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

The provisions in this international bill of rights for women have made a significant impact on the policies of States who are signatories to the treaty. Today, 125 States outlaw domestic violence; 115 guarantee women's equal property rights; and 117 have equal pay laws.

The Beijing Platform for Action from the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 and the Platform for Action from the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo are further international milestones for women's rights that have influenced countries' policy and legislation over the past two decades.

The legal framework is there. But it is clear that rights alone do not guarantee equality and justice for women. As all of you here know, the real test of good governance and effective administration is not just whether a state commits to international treaties or creates legislation. It is how well a state can put its commitments into practice.

Despite rapid progress in women's rights, for most women in the world, gender equality and justice are still out of reach. Women continue to face discrimination and disadvantage in nearly every aspect of life, from property and land ownership, to employment, to reproductive health, to political participation.

Many of these challenges are at heart problems of public administration - problems of accountability and fairness that can be solved with political will and corrective action. The independent voice of an ombudsman has the authority and credibility to make sure women's rights don't go out of sight and out of mind.

One example is the right to education. There is little argument about the effectiveness of educating girls to reduce poverty and promote sustainable growth.

Making education more accessible and effective for girls is necessary to protect girls' right to education, and in practice, it accomplishes far more than that because of the positive multiplier effects.

Studies show that women with an education are empowered with more choices; they marry later, and have healthier and fewer children.

Girls in school are at a much lower risk of threats to their health, such as HIV infection or complications from pregnancy or childbirth- the number one killer of

girls aged 15-19. And they are more likely to find stable, well-paying jobs and to contribute to overall economic growth.

There is no question that denying a woman's access to education is a violation of her rights. But the message must be clear to States: it is also a violation of human rights when they fail to provide education to all of their citizens.

This is not only true for women's education. It is true for women's rights across the board: States can harm their citizens by doing nothing at all. As ombudsmen, you can turn to your countries' legal framework; to the CEDAW treaty; to the Beijing Platform for Action. You can make it known to the public: this is a question of human rights. You can call attention to States' shortcomings, and keep them publicly on your agenda until women's rights are upheld.

Women's empowerment and gender equality are not just the work of States. Women must also be able to assert their rights in society. But in many countries, women's access to justice falls prey to weak and decentralized justice systems. The only recourse for the majority of women is a customary, religious or other informal court. They are reluctant to hear women's grievances, let alone to deliver justice.

Particularly in cases involving family law or gender-based violence, legal codes often systematically discriminate against women. The result is that perpetrators go free or receive a minimal punishment, or women are coerced into dropping the charges altogether. The more marginalized the population- such as poor and indigenous women – the more muddled the justice system becomes, and the more such cases fall on deaf ears.

With the scales of justice tipped so far out of women's favor, the voice of women must be heard to make progress towards fairer, more accessible justice systems.

Ombudsmen cannot change the law, but they can bridge the gap between these isolated groups and the state that is responsible for them. Their actions can also send a strong message that no violations of women's rights will go unpunished. The only effective justice system is one that serves justice for all.

All of these challenges women face- access to justice, basic rights to education, economic opportunity, or freedom from violence- are compounded in the midst of conflict. Women in conflict zones are in danger of sexual and gender-based

violence, forced displacement, loss of land and property, and a range of other violations. The end of hostilities brings little protection to women and even less hope for justice to victims of crimes. Women have the task of rebuilding when for so many of them the war is far from over.

Ombudsmen have great potential to set the precedent in post-conflict environments. They can speak up and speak out against violations of women's rights and end impunity in all cases- with no exceptions.

In the work we have done at UN Women, we have seen first-hand the importance of ombudsmen in securing justice for women affected by sexual and gender-based violence.

In the Caribbean, UN Women has worked with the Caribbean Ombudsmen Association, police representatives and local victim support services to develop a protocol to strengthen cooperation and improve response to reports of gender-based violence.

In Colombia, local ombudsmen play a key role in increasing access to justice for women affected by war. UN Women has worked with Colombian authorities to develop the Victims and Land Restitution Law so that women receive justice and reparations. To receive compensation, the first step victims must take is to report their case to the ombudsman in their municipality.

One thing can be said of all ombudsmen: more and more, countries look to you as builders of democracy and defenders of human rights. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ombudsmen can and should take full advantage of this role, even in the most well-established of democracies.

In particular, I encourage you to focus on three critical priorities:

First, to be a strong champion to end violence against girls and women.

Second, to advocate for women's economic opportunities, and especially for equal pay for equal work.

And finally, to promote women's political leadership through the adoption of temporary special measures such as quotas to reserve at least 30 percent of parliamentary seats for women.

There is a growing recognition that no enduring solution to the challenges of our day can be solved without the full and equal participation of women. But there is much work to be done. Defending women's rights is one of the greatest contributions you can make in the service of your countries and your people.

I urge you all to be the voice of justice. Be the voice of those whose voices often go unheard. Each one of you can make a great contribution: to ensure that the founding principle of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights- respect for the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family- is the lived reality of every society.

I congratulate you all, on behalf of UN Women, and thank you for your work to advance the rights of women and of all citizens and ensure good governance, transparency, and justice for all. I wish you a productive conference.

Thank you.