

Proposed Remarks for Keynote Speech- Women in Public Administration Event.

Good morning.

It is a pleasure to join you today in this important conversation on women's leadership in public administration and service delivery. I want to thank the organizers of this session and the World Bank for their continued commitment to advancing gender equality in the public sector.

As a former president of Chile, a medical doctor, and someone who has spent a significant part of her life in public service—including at the United Nations—I have witnessed firsthand the transformative power of women in leadership. I have also seen, and personally experienced, the obstacles that stand in our way.

When I began my career as a young physician, I didn't anticipate that life would lead me to the presidency. But in both operating rooms and cabinet rooms, one thing remains constant: the need to listen, to care deeply, and to act decisively—even when the task seems insurmountable.

A Male-Dominated Space

As many of you know, I was Chile's first female Minister of Defense before becoming the country's first woman president. Stepping into the Defense Ministry as a woman—let alone as a pediatrician—was met with skepticism. Some questioned whether I had the "strength" or the "toughness" for the role.

But strength comes in many forms. It's not only found in commanding armies—it's found in resilience, in strategic thinking, in empathy, and in the ability to unite people toward a shared goal. And I would argue that those qualities are in abundant supply among women, especially those who have had to navigate institutions never designed with them in mind.

Leadership is not gendered. But opportunity, unfortunately, still is.

The Numbers Tell a Story

Today, we know that 46 percent of the public sector workforce globally are women—compared to just 33 percent in the private sector. That is encouraging. But let us look deeper.

Women are still disproportionately represented in clerical and frontline roles in the public sector, particularly in areas like education and healthcare. I think back on my own experience as Health Minister in Chile. These are critical sectors—they shape our well-being, our knowledge, and the future of our societies. And yet, while women are essential to delivering these services, their perspectives are often missing from the leadership and decision-making tables that guide them. They are in the classroom, seeing the challenges with their own eyes. Imagine if our education policies reflected those firsthand experiences.

In the public sector, over 55 percent of clerical roles are held by women, but that drops to just 34 percent in managerial positions. This is what we call vertical segregation. A structural pattern in the global labor market, more entrenched than the 'glass ceiling'.

And even when women perform the same tasks with equal or better qualifications, we earn 12 to 14 percent less than our male colleagues on average, globally. Same work, but lower pay.

This is not just a matter of fairness — the truth is, we all lose when societies and economies underutilize half their talent.

But this is an important point: when making policy decisions about increasing the number of women participating in the labor force, we must consider their ‘double burden.’ To consider women’s productive and reproductive work, including ‘care work’. So, we must be careful in our policy recommendations, so we do not overburden women who are already doing so much.

Moving beyond Participation, to Power

So yes—participation is important. But it is not enough.

If we are serious about encouraging gender equality in the public sector, we must move beyond the rhetoric of increasing female labor force participation. We need to take a closer look at the **real lives of women**—their everyday experiences, the barriers they face, and the power they are able—or unable—to wield within their workplaces and communities.

There are **three key areas** I want to emphasize as we shift the conversation from participation to power:

First, we must recognize that when women enter leadership roles, they gain the power to shape decisions—budgets, policies, and institutional priorities. This is not symbolic; it is structural. Leadership is where influence resides. Initiatives supported by the World Bank in countries like **Ethiopia and Jordan**, which promote career advancement for women in public administration, are promising. But let us ensure that women are supported to stay, to grow, and to lead.

Second, we need to build **enabling environments** that help women thrive, not just survive. This means investing in mentorship programs, ensuring transparent hiring and promotion processes, offering paid family leave, and upholding zero tolerance for harassment. These are not luxuries. They are the foundation of a professional culture where women can succeed on equal footing.

Third, we need to ground our commitments in **data and accountability**. As the *Worldwide Bureaucracy Indicators* remind us: we cannot manage what we do not measure. Data helps us uncover the hidden layers of inequality—who is advancing, who is left behind, and why. It also gives us the evidence base to design better policies and measure progress honestly.

My Journey, Our Challenge

Speaking from my own personal experiences: I remember in my first presidency; we made it a goal to ensure that half of my cabinet would be women. Many questioned whether we could find enough qualified women. The truth is, we didn’t have to look far. The talent was there—it had just been overlooked.

What we needed—and what many governments still need—is the political will to recognize and promote that talent.

Throughout my career, I’ve seen that when women lead, they bring new perspectives, often more inclusive approaches, and an unwavering focus on the human side of governance. As a doctor, I was

trained to diagnose, to understand context, and to care—not just for symptoms but for root causes. That approach has served me well in leadership.

Whether in public health or public policy, we must treat inequity at its roots. That means challenging systemic biases, building leadership pipelines for women, and measuring our progress rigorously..

I have been encouraged to see the World Bank Group placing greater emphasis on measuring outcomes, rather than simply focusing on deliverables or outputs. This signals a more holistic understanding of individuals—not just as recipients of services, but as people whose lives, capabilities, and opportunities we recognize. Alongside the updated Human Capital Index, these efforts represent a real shift in how the World Bank Group understands and defines results. It is not just about what is delivered, but about what **changes**—and for whom.

Leadership for Better Outcomes

The existing evidence shows that women in leadership improve service delivery outcomes. The data is clear. In health, education, energy—sectors with deep implications for people’s daily lives—greater female representation in decision-making leads to better service delivery.

When women are in leadership, they are more likely to invest in social infrastructure, prioritize equitable access, and engage communities.

We are not saying that women are better leaders by nature. We are saying that inclusive leadership—by men and women—creates better policies because it reflects the needs of all citizens.

I would like to emphasize this is not a “women’s issue.” This is an issue of good governance, of institutional legitimacy, of development...and of progress.

Closing Reflections

Let me be clear: We have made progress.

But too many girls still grow up in a world where leadership is imagined with a male face. Too many women still work in systems where their contributions are undervalued, where their careers are sidelined, or their voices unheard.

I am proud of what we’ve achieved in Chile, and my roles at UN Women and the UN Human Rights Office. But, I am also acutely aware of how much further we need to go. Together.

The public sector must lead by example.

We must model equality—not only in our policies but in our practices. And we must do so with urgency, because every day that we wait is a day of lost potential, and progress for future generations.

Thank you all for your commitment to this work. Your leadership matters. Let us work together—with purpose, with courage, and with the conviction that equality is not just possible—it is necessary.

I look forward to our discussion and to hearing your stories and experiences.

Thank you.

