

PEACE, DEVELOPMENT, HUMAN RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY: THE STORY OF MY LIFE

MICHELLE BACHELET

SIPRI
Lecture

02

STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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SIPRI Annual Lecture No. 2

MICHELLE BACHELET



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Preface

On 27 May 2019, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), hosted the second annual SIPRI Lecture, in the presence of His Majesty Carl XVI Gustaf and Her Majesty Queen Silvia.

HE Michelle Bachelet has shown an unwavering commitment to human rights and gender equality. As the first female President of Chile in 2006 she implemented sweeping reforms that revitalized the country's economy, reduced poverty and improved access to early childhood education. In 2010—after her successful first term in office—she was appointed as the Executive Director of the newly created United Nations (UN) Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, or UN Women.

After serving UN Women for three years, she returned to politics in 2014 and won the Chilean presidential election with a larger proportion of the vote than in 2006; she thus became the first two-time president of Chile since the end of Augusto Pinochet's rule. Michelle Bachelet's administration introduced policies that targeted Chile's growing income inequality and bolstered the rights of women and of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people.

In her current post as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet has shown admirable determination and leadership. She has used her position to bring the attention of the international community to minorities that face persecution, in particular, the Rohingya in Myanmar, Palestinians in Gaza, and the Uighur population in Xinjiang.

Michelle Bachelet's lecture covers key challenges to human rights in our time, the sources of those challenges, and the ways in which it is possible to address them. Her lecture was followed by a panel discussion with her and Ambassador Jan Eliasson, Chair of the SIPRI Governing Board, which delved further into issues she had raised. The event concluded with a closing statement by HE Margot Wallström, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Sweden.

On behalf of SIPRI, I would like to extend my gratitude to Michelle Bachelet for her address. It was a great occasion and she has left us with some memorable insights.

Dan Smith
Director, SIPRI
December 2019

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Your Majesties, Minister Wallström, Chair of the Board of SIPRI Ambassador Jan Eliasson, Members of the Board, Excellencies, friends, and colleagues.

It is an honour to speak at this institute, whose excellent work on peace, accountability and prevention, including the facilitation of dialogue, and analysis of the security risks generated by climate change, I have known for a long time.

Due to my interest in climate change, I was recently reminded of the idea of a keystone species. As you may know, a keystone species is a plant or animal, which functions in its ecosystem like the keystone in an arch. It keeps other forces in balance. This species may look humble—like a starfish—but if it is removed, the ecosystem will collapse.

Why am I saying this? Because I decided to take up this job as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights—and I am here today, at this beautiful Institute—partly due to one or two keystones, which have brought me the passion to try to do what should be done, and the conviction to speak out in favour of the ideas I believe in.

Dialogue

Dialogue has been one of my keystones. I have found it's fundamental to issues such as reconciliation, which as you know, is a painstaking and difficult process for many countries, including my own.

What's important is to expand our understanding, and establish spaces of dialogue, which may become bridges between opposing points of view, and help create a road to durably peaceful societies. Where there is a confrontational spirit, positive progress is less likely.

During my tenure as Minister of Defence, I had to address the issue of amnesty for human rights violations perpetrated by the military and bringing some level of peace to the relatives of the disappeared. We needed to move towards truth, justice and reconciliation.

So, through dialogue with some key military leaders, we set up and strengthened processes and strategies, which allowed us to say to each other, 'Look, we might never agree on what happened in the past, but we all love our nation, we need to ensure that it is stable and its democracy is not endangered.'

Conviction

Another keystone has been conviction. It may seem very unlikely, but I have learned that within that dialogue, if one maintains a clear and determined grasp

on principle, advances in a constructive way, and sets clear priorities, one can achieve important progress.

In my career, I have kept this always in mind. Be it as Minister of Health, when the first priority was to improve primary care—to vastly improve our health system, and address its inequalities in access and quality care.

The same was true when I became President of Chile. It was an occasion of tremendous joy and an explosion of possibilities. The biggest task we faced was making Chilean society more inclusive, undoing the discrimination, which held so many people back, forcing them to the margins of society.

To build a more cohesive society, we needed to focus much more on spreading economic growth and making sure it benefited a much wider group of people, with better services, and a strong focus on early child development.

And, in my second presidential term, we made it possible for all students (women and men) in Chile to obtain not only primary and secondary, but also university education free of charge for 70 per cent of students.

We moved fast on other key reforms, including reforms to ensure more representation of women in political parties and in parliament. We worked to provide wider public childcare, so that mothers could work. We strengthened laws against domestic violence. We built a stronger economic base. So, we did many things I felt were fundamental in a society, that gradually could ensure and expand democracy and people's rights.

When you are a paediatrician, you know that the big picture may be very important, but you also know that big picture is always made up of little pictures—individual lives. Any economic theory—or political theory for that matter—which does not focus on human beings is just that: a theory. Economic and political systems exist in order to improve people's well-being.

We have to do all we can to ensure that all, especially the younger generation, do not need to wait to gain access to the basic elements of human dignity.

As High Commissioner, dialogue and conviction are key elements for complying with my mandate. I must ensure that human rights are at the core of all the UN's work.

All of us can contribute. The work of my Office in promoting and protecting human rights around the world is unique. But how could anyone think one office would be the only voice in the world on human rights? This is your job, too. It is the job of every member of every society. And it is one we can achieve. Sweden has been an excellent ally in this process, through your commitment with human rights-based policies nationally and internationally.

Justice

Justice matters. Justice can bring peace. It doesn't eliminate disputes, but when people have confidence in an impartial and independent structure of law and norms, they know they will be able to resolve their differences peacefully.

This is true within and among countries, as long as the international rule of law retains the confidence of relevant actors.

Shared solutions work. Whether we're talking about shared laws, or an agreement on joint action to target a common problem based on shared principles, policies that are grounded in dialogue, built on inclusion, and guided by human rights goals make for more effective and better outcomes.

They have worked in the past, to encourage peace and development, and they can work in the future, shared with billions of other people across the world.

Policies that build social justice and social protection also promote stronger economies. They drive better frameworks for education, healthcare, and other basic services—and they feed into political systems, which actively embrace a range of noisy contributing voices.

Human-rights based policies build confidence and social harmony. They deepen trust. They build hope. In our lifetime, this has happened again and again, in various parts of the world, as policies grounded in human rights shape greater justice, equality and dignity.

And it can be done again. We are facing very strong challenges, yet with conviction and through dialogue we can address them and achieve peace and security.

And, while we continue to work with the traditional human rights challenges, we are also addressing 'third generation' issues.

Climate change

Climate change is a comprehensive and devastating threat to human rights—and indeed, human life.

The increasingly relentless reality of climate change requires that we work together as never before. We need to generate growth that is socially legitimate, environmentally sustainable and broadly inclusive. To achieve this, we must change our development models. It might seem impossible, but this kind of structural reform can be carried out. I have seen it done.

From increased poverty and food insecurity, to growing water stress and accelerated environmental damage, it is a clear threat to human dignity, and to the gains that have been made in building inclusive and sustainable development.

Climate change is driving displacement and heightening tensions and inequalities within societies, driving conflict—including violent conflict.

For example, migrant flows have increased in some Central American countries, which are experiencing longer and more frequent droughts, which impact the livelihood of numerous people.

Food and economic insecurity

In parallel, we unfortunately do not see a positive evolution on some other, like food insecurity. After many years in which undernourishment and food insecurity has declined, the number of 'undernourished' people rose from 777 million in 2015 to 815 million in 2016—mainly due to conflicts, as well as drought and other climate-linked disasters. 815 million is 11 per cent of humanity: in other words,

one out of every nine women, men and children around the world is still going without sufficient food.

Economic inequalities are also growing. There is more wealth, but more inequality. As the International Labour Organization has pointed out, the labour share of gross domestic products has been falling for 25 years, and this trend has continued.

Oxfam has asserted that 82 per cent of all the wealth generated in 2016 went to the richest 1 per cent of the global population, while the poorest half of humanity saw no change in their income—leaving them even further behind.

The UN's *Financing for Sustainable Development Report 2019* says that low wage growth, rising inequalities, and insufficient action on the Sustainable Development Goals threaten to undermine the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Civil society and women's rights

Yet, another challenge is the shrinking civil society space, which has repercussions across a very wide spectrum of government policies—and human rights. Participation by the people in decisionmaking is a vital force to drive accountability.

When governments shut down all criticism, they are no longer listening to the contributions of all the people. The results are a negative impact on housing, education, and health policies, as well as, development, defense, and every sector of State activity. Measures that curtail the rights and voices of civil society also undermine our hope of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

In a wide number of countries, laws and policies that restrict and, in many cases, criminalize civic activity are increasingly being adopted. These measures include restrictions on freedom of expression and participation in peaceful demonstrations; restrictions on free and independent media sources; restrictions on the ability to register human rights non-governmental organizations and to receive foreign funding; and vaguely worded anti-terrorism legislation, which can be misused to target almost any form of criticism.

They, also, use of technology to track and harass human rights defenders, journalists and critics.

Another area where we all have a responsibility to remain alert is women's rights. Advances made in previous decades have stalled in some places—and in some cases, are heading backwards. These rollbacks are underpinned by what seems to be a renewed obsession with controlling and limiting women's decisions over their bodies and lives, and by views that a woman's role should be essentially restricted to reproduction and the family.

Women are still much poorer than men. They have less property, fewer opportunities, less access to basic services, and a lot less freedom to raise their voices and make their own choices.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex communities and their rights are still being ignored. They continue to be criminalized in many parts of the world and unfairly treated.

Conflict and displacement

At the heart of many conflicts, we can find inequalities. We need to deal with those root causes, if we are to prevent it. The devastation of today's conflicts, and their huge economic and humanitarian costs, create broad and enduring harm. There is no victory, no winner, in a conflict that destroys lives, land, infrastructure, economies, and hope.

We are seeing fewer wars between states, but more, and more enduring, intra-state conflicts—with the involvement of foreign countries.

Greater efforts must be made to rationalize and control the proliferation of arms, and the conduct and risk of conflict.

But instead, countries are eroding the agreements, which do exist. It has been 70 years since the Geneva Conventions laid out the minimal, basic decencies to be respected by all parties in conflict, to preserve the lives and dignity of civilians, *hors de combat* soldiers and prisoners of war. But the actors of today's conflicts increasingly fail to respect even these minimal commitments.

Unfortunately, in places where there used to be war, now there is none, but gender-based violence remains as a huge threat for many women. Children are tortured and killed in front of their parents, to create widespread fear; they are abducted and used as soldiers, or as sexual slaves; they are deprived of education.

And although measures to identify these violations and hold those responsible to account *are* being taken—including by my Office—they are not unanimously supported by the world's states. Governments need to do a much better job to support accountability for violations of international humanitarian law.

Conflicts impoverish nations and drive displacement. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 44 400 people are forced to flee their homes every day because of conflict or persecution. Most are internally displaced; others will try, desperately, to find safety across international borders.

These migrants are women, men and children exactly like you and me. They are our equals, but increasingly, instead of measures to assist and protect them, they are greeted by barriers; pushed back into danger; and humiliated, threatened, detained, and exposed to unnecessary risk.

A great deal more could be said about these three challenges, all of them connected—climate change fuelling migration and conflict; conflict, too, fuelling migration—but there are a number of other, very significant challenges to human rights that are also increasing in scope and intensity today.

There is a global rise in hatred being directed at members of racial, ethnic and religious groups, as well as against foreigners and other minorities. In many countries, what used to be extremist ideas have now entered the political mainstream, in tandem with a nativist, exclusionary, and intolerant world view that also attacks efforts to maintain multilateral agreements and measures to ensure greater social justice. And this world view exacerbates global instability by shirking, instead of sharing, global burdens.

All these negative trends, profoundly corrosive to our hope for a decent future, seem to accelerate and accentuate each other.

But the solutions are also connected.

Solutions

Some countries—not always the richest, in income or resources—are choosing to adopt principled policies that are also more effective. Because they are grounded in the full range of human rights—taking steps to advance civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights together—they are more effective.

I am fully aware of the constraints on leaders—often very heavy historic, political, economic and even cultural constraints. But I also know that the most effective solutions are grounded in constructive dialogue, a focus on human beings, and principled determination.

Military leaders can commit to ending military intervention in democratic politics. Centuries of prejudice and discrimination can be ended. Its legacy can be dismantled through consensus, even in very conservative societies.

Optimism can be realistic—a human rights agenda is a practical plan of action. It is possible to change course. Countries can reverse their positions and embark on principled, unifying transformation.

There will be no lasting well-being, when only a few privileged groups benefit from economic growth. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls on all countries to transform together, based on their own strengths, and to expand their inclusive forces, to meet our shared challenges.

The world is a better place, when we work together: men and women; people from all sides of the political spectrum; countries across the world. All of us—not only governments, but also individuals—must dare to embark on that dialogue and engagement.

We can create a mutually reinforcing dynamic, in which justice and greater civic freedom build sound development policies, and measures for social protection feed into and greater social harmony and trust.

We need to reform institutions, which have questionable legitimacy, because of corruption or other factors, which mean they fail to respond to the needs of the people. Trust is essential to ensuring the unity and harmony of any society.

We are currently witnessing a rejection and a lack of confidence in governments. But clearly, only in a space of respect and trust will collective projects can evolve, linking individual expectations and initiatives with the great dreams of society. This kind of institutional reconciliation and reform is difficult, but it is possible. I have seen it done.

In the face of growing opposition, we need to reinforce multilateralism. We need to strengthen our capacity for dialogue, both regionally and globally, in order to reach realistic agreements. We need principled leadership to ensure a global, fair and sustainable model of development, which quells people's anxieties about survival, hunger, poverty and violence. I firmly believe we can do this.

But by trying to see matters with full clarity, and understand others' points of view; by acting with integrity, to advance justice and human rights; by seeking always to build on your love for other people and all forms of life; by looking to construct, and advance—rather than to destroy—we can turn the tide. We can build more durable peace; more sustainable development; and greater justice, dignity and rights.

We have a path to solve the problems of climate change, and growing conflicts. We have the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, fully negotiated by every State, and can eradicate extreme poverty and include far more people in the benefits of development. We have the Paris Climate Agreement, which calls for focused action to mitigate and slow environmental disasters, and its implementation has the potential for real impact. And all of these measures rely on support for human dignity, equality and human rights.

Fundamental rights and freedoms are the elements that build resilient societies—which are able to withstand and surmount threats, peacefully resolve disputes, and facilitate sustained progress in prosperity and well-being for all their members.


You know this is true, because it has been true in your own lives. Those of you who have benefited from life in peaceful and sustainably prosperous societies are living in countries where people's rights are being upheld.

Those of you who have not always benefited from such conditions in your own lives will know what I am talking about. Actions that are grounded in fear build hatred, grievance and cycles of violence; they build exploitation and destroy the sense that we share our societies and planet, and must cooperate to find solutions for it.


It is the principles of human rights that build more stable, more peaceful and more adaptable societies. With dialogue, cooperation, and respect, they are a detailed guide through the unpredictable challenges of future events. Whether they involve transformations of the digital landscape or the prospect of violence, human rights principles and law have been constructed to protect humanity from danger.

It is time to come together, with dialogue and conviction, to build greater respect for human rights.

Thank you

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michelle Bachelet', with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the signature.

Michelle Bachelet

A large, diverse audience is seated in a grand hall with high ceilings and ornate architectural details. The audience members are dressed in formal attire, and many are looking towards the right side of the frame, presumably towards a speaker or a stage. The lighting is warm and focused on the audience, with some bright spots from stage lights visible in the background.

● **Michelle Bachelet** (Chile) is the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Ms. Bachelet was elected President of Chile on two occasions (2006–10 and 2014–18). She was the first female president of Chile. She served as Health Minister (2000–2002) as well as Chile’s and Latin America’s first female Defense Minister (2002–2004). During her presidential tenures, she promoted the rights of all but particularly those of the most vulnerable. Among her many achievements, education and tax reforms, as well as the creation of the National Institute for Human Rights and the Museum of Memory and Human Rights stand out, as do the establishment of the Ministry of Women and Gender Equality, the adoption of quotas to increase women’s political participation, and the approval of Civil Union Act legislation, granting rights to same sex couples and thus, advancing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights.