Speech of H.E. Ms. Michelle Bachelet
Executive Director of UN Women

High Level Parallel Event
« A worldwide ban on female genital mutilation: from the Decision of the African Union to a United Nations General Assembly Resolution »

New York, 27 February 2012

Honorable and Distinguished Delegates,
Prime Ministers and Première Dames,
Friends,
Activists,
Fellow Speakers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all I want to thank the organizers for inviting me to this great event, and I think that it's a very good news they had to change the place because it was too small for so many people who are engaged on this: our common goals, and I want also to acknowledge the vital role of the Ban FGM Coalition in advocating for global action to address female genital mutilation.

Ending violence against women and girls is, of course, one of our priorities in UN Women. It is prominent in our Strategic Plan, and in the partnerships that we enjoy with our sister UN agencies and civil society. Violence against women and girls is one of the most pervasive violation of human rights in the world. From domestic and sexual violence, to rape as a tactic of warfare, to trafficking and harmful practices, such as child marriage and female genital mutilation, this violence takes a heavy toll. The costs and consequences of all these forms of gender-based violence are vast, not only to the lives, dignity and rights of women and girls, but also to families, communities, societies and economies at large.

Ending violence against women and girls has gained unprecedented political momentum in recent years. So change is happening every day: let me share with you some information. Earlier this month, the UN Population Fund and UNICEF released a report, pointing to the abandonment of female genital mutilation/cutting by 8,000 communities across Africa in the past few years.

Yet female genital mutilation is still widely prevalent, with between 100 and 140 million girls and women in the world having undergone the practice, according to the World Health Organization. And trends in areas such as increased medicalisation or lowering of the average age at which a girl is cut are also
discouraging. We are struggling against some of the most intransigent of social forces - adverse cultural norms, practices and traditions, as well as patriarchal attitudes deeply rooted in gender discrimination.

But on the other hand there are grounds for optimism – not least the determination of people such as those of you here today, to make a difference. We understand now the importance of a holistic approach, including not only legislative and policy measures – those are important, but not enough -, but we need also protection and services, prevention, educational and awareness-raising measures, training and advocacy, and of course data collection and research. The active engagement of all segments of society, including women and girls, men and boys, young people, -we need men on board, we need man championing to ban FGM from the life of women -, we need young people, community and faith-based organizations and leaders as well as the media, is crucial to end female genital mutilation. As public declarations to end the practice attest, communities play a central role if we want to succeed in our common cause.

In the last few years there has been a growing impetus to address female genital mutilation at national, regional and international levels. UN Women, in its efforts to respond to all forms of violence against women and girls, including female genital mutilation, has supported States, together with other UN agencies and civil society organizations, to adopt legislation that addresses the practice, advocate for policies, and organize community and educational programmes.

The African Union decision, adopted last year, calling for a General Assembly resolution to ban female genital mutilation, contributed to this momentum. The decision reiterates the importance of enhancing efforts at the global level to effectively address the practice. Any and all inter-governmental and national efforts aimed at furthering the human rights of women and girls provide welcome opportunities to consolidate and build on efforts undertaken so far.

Deeply rooted and complex problems, we are confronted a deeply rooted and extremely complex problem, and what really we need is vibrant and energetic partnerships. This is as true with regard to FGM as it is with any other very important issue dealing with women's rights. UN Women is proud to count itself among the partners working to end female genital mutilation, and looks forward to working with you all toward that goal. You can count on us.

Thank you.