In March 2013, former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet taped her final International Women's Day message as executive director of UN Women. She chose to focus her message—and the entire UN discussion that day—on combatting violence against women.

Let us work together for strong laws and policies and for effective implementation. Let us work together for prevention and education and for programmes that provide essential services for the victims and survivors of violence.

Today and every day we say NO to discrimination and violence against women and girls. NO to domestic violence and abuse. NO to rape and sexual violence. NO to human trafficking and...
sexual slavery. NO to female genital mutilation. NO to child brides and child marriage. NO to murders committed in the name of honour or passion. NO to femicide. NO to impunity.

And we say YES to peace, human rights, justice and equality.

Bachelet stepped down from her UN post to run once again for the Chilean presidency in November 2013. She is the strong favorite, and if she wins, it will be particularly interesting to see how she approaches issues of violence against women. If she can make good on her pledge made last March, she will not only help the women of Chile, but set a regional and global example.

Violence against women has always been an area of particular concern across Latin America, and recent reports show that it is on the rise. This makes Bachelet's leadership particularly crucial. Given her previous work on behalf of women, her passion for their cause, and her understanding of the issues, Bachelet is uniquely positioned to go beyond creative legislation to make the normative changes necessary for deep, enduring transformation.

Violence Against Women in Chile

If Bachelet wins, she will return to office with a head start. Her successor, current president of Chile Sebastián Piñera, has also made violence against women part of his legislative agenda. Piñera has focused on femicide, enacting legislation that increased punishment for those who have murdered a current or former female romantic partner. He's had some success, reporting a 30 percent dip in femicides from 2010 (49) to 2013 (34). However, it is dangerous to rely on those statistics, since cultural norms prevent reporting in many cases. Also, the narrow focus on femicide has sparked criticism, and funding and enforcement are not at the levels that experts think are required to be effective.

One University of Michigan study found that violence against women is particularly prevalent in low-income areas, and that "a comprehensive approach incorporating both neighborhood- and individual-level factors may be critical in designing effective preventive interventions for domestic violence."

Lack of enforcement and funding are common flaws in the implementation of efforts to confront violence against women. As president, Bachelet supported legislation to combat domestic violence against women. The law was passed, but according to the 2009 UN Country Assessment on VAW (Violence Against Women) for Chile, it lacked the "necessary measures to ensure an effective and efficient application of the law, nor of the financial resources needed for an adequate implementation."

If she regains the office of president, Bachelet will have a second chance to pass a more impactful, broad agenda that goes further to protect women. She's surrounded by cautionary tales that demonstrate the scale of the challenge she faces.

Violence Against Women on the Rise in the Region

The UN defines violence against women (VAW) as "any act or conduct, based on gender, which causes death or physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, whether in the public or the private sphere."

Dubbed a byproduct of "machista culture," studies have long shown the prevalence of VAW in Latin American countries. Machismo often makes an appearance in introductions and conclusions of such
as an amorphous, inescapable reality. Thus machismo—the cult of "manliness" seen as responsible for deep-seated cultural notions about the treatment of women that resist sophisticated public policy reforms—becomes the scapegoat for failed policy and legislation. But it's not enough to vaguely refer to an X-factor in the culture that prevents change from happening. Policies, programs and public education must be targeted at that factor in order to achieve change, rather than working around machismo, waiting for it to disappear or fade.

As women gain greater political power, and also because of concerted efforts of UN agencies and grass-roots advocacy groups, more resources to help female victims of violence have become available in Latin America. Urban centers, in particular, now have more safe havens and other services for victims of violence. Federal governments in Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina have turned to creative solutions like issuing GPS-equipped "panic buttons" to former victims of violence who have restraining orders in effect, so that they can call easily for help if they encounter their former abusers.

While a necessary first step, public policy efforts to reduce violence against women have not had the desired impact. Throughout the region, despite a range of legislation, domestic violence persists. El Salvador, Mexico, Colombia, Bolivia and other countries in the region all report steady or increasing levels of varying types of violence against women. Bolivia and Guatemala still report among the highest global rates of femicide. Moreover, these crimes go largely unpunished. Of 442,000 reports of gender-based violence in Bolivia between 2007 and 2011, only 96 have been prosecuted, according to the Centro de Informacion y Desarrollo de la Mujer.

Take Brazil, currently under the leadership of a female president, Dilma Rousseff. In 2006 under the previous president, Lula da Silva, the country enacted a globally lauded law to combat violence against women: the Maria da Penha Law on Domestic and Family Violence. This landmark law laid the foundation for a variety of resources for victims of abuse, from legal aid to psychological support, social services, health, education, work and housing. It tripled prison penalties for perpetrators, created the possibility of preventative imprisonment, and indicated that prevention education should be implemented in schools.

The creative and wide-ranging suite of approaches in the Maria da Penha law caught global attention. However, recent statistics show that violence against women in Brazil remains high.

A study of the law's efficacy published in Health and Human Rights Journal found that women are still reluctant to report domestic violence, and that Brazil has done little to implement preventative action via general education and marketing campaigns to shift norms that make women fearful and ashamed of reporting violence—or to make men more aware that this behavior is not acceptable. Health care providers also lack the tools to confront issues of domestic violence.

The lack of preparedness of health providers to respond or refer in cases of violence could also contribute to women's silence. Evidence showed that, at the time of our research, there were still many barriers for primary health care provider in São Paulo to assist in cases of violence against women.

Other studies confirmed that health care professionals felt ill-equipped to respond when treating victims of domestic violence.

By 2008, femicide in Brazil had returned to pre-2006 levels.
Last year, UN Women reported that a woman is assaulted every 15 seconds in Sao Paulo. And between January and March of 2013, 1,822 rapes were reported in the Brazilian state of Rio de Janeiro. Only 70 men were arrested.

UN Women: Creative Solutions

As part of the International Women's Day summit last year, where Bachelet made her remarks, the UN Commission on the Status of Women released a comprehensive report full of recommendations to prevent and eliminate violence against women. The report asserted that discrimination of any kind towards women helped support a culture of violence, and therefore a multi-pronged approach was required. The report acknowledged progress in passing legislation that is intended to punish violence against women, but also called for better funding, enforcement, and preventative strategies.

Among the more than 70 strategies recommended was sexual health and gender equality education in schools; public education and marketing campaigns; collaboration with community, religious, and advocacy groups; policies that provide better support and compensation for caregiving; and programs that target men and boys, to help develop responsible behavior toward women.

While still mostly focusing on governmental policy, some of these recommendations, quite rightly, stress the deep, difficult work involved in culture change. There is an emphasis on provision of woman-friendly health care services; education of health care providers in treating victims of violence; and adjustment of gender norms in media, schools, and public discourse.

Most important, and not emphasized enough, is the education and involvement of males. If men and boys are taught and accept that violence is unacceptable in their families and in the families of their friends and relations, norms will shift as a result—and the responsibility for advocacy and change is no longer placed on the victim.

Bachelet's Opportunity

In her presidential campaign, Michelle Bachelet has addressed a range of priorities. Her website features campaign promises on education reform, broader support of arts and culture, health, urban planning, constitutional reform, tax reform, and public security. It makes sense that she would spend this time demonstrating her readiness to take on a broad range of policies that will benefit the majority of Chileans. Among them, she does include gender violence as a priority in her public security platform and an initiative to encourage greater participation of women in politics. Yet it is not at the top of her list—and she hasn't been promoting it as central to her platform.

In general terms, Bachelet calls for more education to prevent domestic violence, for more crisis centers, and for better education of police and health professionals to handle cases of violence against women. However, keeping these proposals squarely within the category of public security does not indicate whether her approach will be as creative or wide-ranging as the recommendations in the March 2013 Commission on the Status of Women Report. She can go much further in changing cultural norms by including an initiative to better educate men and boys from an early age, and by engaging a variety of neighborhood leaders in the effort to change behavior.

If Bachelet wins in November, she will have to juggle everything from economic welfare and growth, to constitutional reform, to foreign policy. Given how she has spent her last three years, however, she has an unparalleled expertise and opportunity to pioneer meaningful culture change in Chile of the sort that Brazil and other countries have attempted, but fallen short of, in recent years. Bachelet can build on the momentum that she started in her last term, that Pinera amplified, and expand...
beyond femicide to make Chile the poster child for eradicating violence against women.

By experimenting with the recommendations that she oversaw at UN Women, she can create a lasting legacy with a multi-pronged approach that properly funds and enforces regulations, but even more importantly, goes to the root of the problem by bringing about cultural change. This way, Bachelet, Chilean men and women can truly say "NO" to violence against women, even in a traditionally "machista" country. It would be a shame for them to miss their chance.