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Former Chilean President to Lead New U.N. Agency

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR

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UNITED NATIONS — [Michelle Bachelet](#), famous for breaking gender barriers by becoming [the first woman elected president of Chile](#), will head the new global [United Nations](#) agency created to advance women's rights, Secretary General [Ban Ki-moon](#) announced Tuesday.

Mr. Ban said he chose Ms. Bachelet, 58, from 26 candidates for her political skills and ability to create consensus. She had been a front-runner from the start.

"We have to make sure that women's issues are an essential element on the agendas of all heads of state, all governments," Ms. Bachelet said in an interview.

The United Nations has been overshadowed on numerous issues by other global organizations in recent years, but Ms. Bachelet said the very fact that it was creating an agency to concentrate on women indicated the priority being given to "putting women's issues in a higher position."

New reports had suggested that Ms. Bachelet wanted to stay active in Chilean politics after finishing her term in March, but she said she had never commented publicly on the job. Still, she acknowledged, it was a tough choice to move away from Chile and her three children — her youngest daughter is just finishing high school while the other two are grown.

"I will always care about what happens in Chile, so it was not an easy decision," she said, noting that she ultimately decided she wanted the challenge.

Ms. Bachelet comes with a "wealth of experience, global leadership, and global stature," Mr. Ban said, and will bring to the post "a real force to meet the expectations of many women and girls and children around the world."

It took four years of wrangling among member states to create the agency, which consolidates four smaller agencies whose work on women's issues often overlapped. It has been given [the rather unwieldy title](#) of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and

the Empowerment of Women, but in diplomatic shorthand it is often called the “Gender Entity.”

In 1995 in Beijing, United Nations member states signed off on a declaration to achieve women’s equality. Among other issues, it called on governments to end discrimination against women and close the gender gap in 12 fields, including education, employment, health, human rights and political participation. That platform will basically become the agenda for U.N. Women when it officially starts work on January 1, 2011.

Even before the [General Assembly](#) approved the new agency in July, Mr. Ban was focused on finding a woman from the “south” to run it, worried that bringing in a leader from the richer, developed states might cause resentment that Western nations were using the United Nations to foist their values on the rest of the world.

Ms. Bachelet said she was aware that some of the socially groundbreaking policies she put forward in Chile might not have a universal application, that cultural approaches will vary. “In some places women have all the rights they deserve and in others there are big restrictions — in some countries they even mutilate women,” she said, referring to the custom of [female circumcision](#). “In some places it will be faster and others it will take longer. It is not easy and it has a lot of controversial aspects.”

Having a board that represents all areas of the world and lots of women experienced in civil society will help speed the work, she said.

Ms. Bachelet, a pediatrician, has been nothing if not an iconoclast. A professed agnostic and single mother of three in a nation that only recently legalized divorce, Ms. Bachelet shattered the mold of traditional politicians in Chile, a Roman Catholic stronghold.

She initially divided her first center-left cabinet among 20 ministers — 10 men and 10 women — unprecedented gender parity for Chile. Her government legalized alimony payments to divorced women and tripled the number of free early-child-care centers for low-income families. Her popularity dove initially after she was elected in 2006 over some domestic issues, but her deft handling of the Chilean economy during the world financial crisis [won her high approval ratings](#).

She left office facing some criticism that [her government was slow to react](#) to a devastating earthquake that hit just as her presidency was ending, but she denied that she had been [reluctant to call out the military](#), which has a bloody past in Chile.

Her father, an air force general, died in prison after being tortured for months under the dictatorship of Gen. [Augusto Pinochet](#). The regime also detained and tortured Ms. Bachelet and her mother in 1975 before they were allowed to seek exile in Australia. Ms. Bachelet returned in 1979.