

Check against delivery

70th session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination
against Women



Statement by
Ms. Kate Gilmore
Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights

Geneva, 2 July 2018

Distinguished members of the Committee,
Friends and Colleagues,

It is a pleasure to be with you for the opening of the **seventieth session** of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Allow me to convey the greetings of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mr. Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, whose term as High Commissioner will end on 31 August this year.

First of all, I wish to **congratulate the members of the Committee whose terms were renewed** at the Twentieth Meeting of States parties in June: Ms. Gladys ACOSTA VARGAS [Peru], Ms. Luiza CHALAL [Algeria], Ms. Naéla GABR [Egypt], Ms. Lia NADARAIA [Georgia] and Ms. Aruna Devi NARAIN [Mauritius]. I also take the opportunity to thank the members who did not stand for re-election and whose term expires at the end of this year, Ms. Feride ACAR [Turkey], Ms. Magalys AROCHA DOMINGUEZ [Cuba], Ms. Ruth HALPERIN-KADDARI [Israel], Ms. Yoko HAYASHI [Japan], Ms. Lilian HOFMEISTER [Austria], Ms. Ismat JAHAN [Bangladesh], and Ms. Patricia SCHULZ [Switzerland], for their contribution to the Committee's work over the past years.

I also have the pleasure to welcome **Ms. Esther Eghobamien-Mshelia** who has been appointed by Nigeria to replace the late Theodora Oby Nwankwo as a Committee member following the passing of Ms. Nwankwo on 9 December 2017.

Distinguished members,

Dear colleagues,

On 13 June, we launched our **Office Management Plan for 2018 to 2021** at an event with Member States. The OMP is based on six 'pillars', which include support for the international human rights mechanisms; mainstreaming of human rights within development and peace and security efforts; and advancement of the core human rights principles of non-discrimination, accountability and participation. Across these pillars, OHCHR will introduce major shifts to strengthen our work to prevent conflict, violence and insecurity and help expand civic space. We will also shift our work to frontier issues such as climate change, digital space, inequality, corruption, and people's displacement and movement.

The OMP is strongly anchored to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and embraces the Agenda's human rights-based commitment to 'leave no one behind'. Over the next four years, we will spotlight the human rights of women, young people, and persons with disabilities, whose potential is often neglected although they are important drivers of change.

While globally gender inequality is gradually reducing, for example in the areas of health and education, progress is often followed by backlash and roll-back. Retrogressive laws and policies restrict women's equal enjoyment of rights and, combined with discriminatory stereotypes and unchallenged harmful practices, threaten the gains that have been made.

The new OMP therefore prioritizes women's rights. It integrates gender issues across all six pillars and defines four gender-specific results covering women's and girls' health; women's and girls' autonomy and choice; gender stereotypes in the judiciary, the media and the education system; and accountability for gender-based violence.

Madame Chair,
Distinguished members,

I would now like to brief you on recent efforts made across the UN system to address **sexual violence in conflict**. At a side event on 15 March, **the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan** launched its report to the Human Rights Council, documenting serious human rights and humanitarian law violations against women and girls, including conflict-related sexual violence, as well as cases of sexual violence against men and boys. The report also documents the lasting physical and psychological impact of these violations on the lives of survivors and communities and provides detailed analysis and recommendations on the measures required to support survivors. The Commission's report includes an analysis of women's status in the South Sudanese patriarchal society largely determined by marriage and addresses how early marriage further reduces women's autonomy and opportunities.

Another report launched during the 37th session of the Human Rights Council in March, by **the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab**

Republic, is entitled “I lost my dignity: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic”. The report concludes that all parties to the conflict, especially Government forces and associated militias, resort to sexual violence as a tool to instil fear, humiliate and punish or, in the case of terrorist groups, as part of their enforced social order. While the immense suffering induced by these practices impacts Syrians from all backgrounds, including men, boys and sexual minorities, women and girls have been disproportionately affected. The report finds that Government forces and associated militias have perpetrated rape and sexual abuse of women and girls and occasionally men during ground operations, house raids to arrest protestors and perceived opposition supporters, and at checkpoints. Women and girls were raped and sometimes gang-raped in detention. Such rapes and other acts of sexual violence formed part of a systematic attack directed against a civilian population and amount to crimes against humanity and, following the onset of the armed conflict in 2012, also war crimes. Similarly, the report finds that stoning of women and girls on charges of adultery, persecution of sexual minorities as well as forced marriages of Sunni women and girls to ISIL fighters in areas under ISIL control equally constitute war crimes.

In April, the Secretary-General submitted his annual report on conflict-related sexual violence to the Security Council. The report was prepared by the **Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict**, your former colleague Pramila Patten, in close consultation with the UN Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict Network, of which OHCHR is part. On 16 April, SRSR Patten briefed the Security Council on the report during its Open Debate on Sexual Violence in Conflict.

The report highlights the clear link between conflict-related sexual violence and root causes of human rights violations such as gender-based discrimination. It shows that the vast majority of victims of conflict-related sexual violence are politically and economically marginalized women and girls, often living in poverty, in rural areas and in refugee camps and displacement settings, outside the radar of rule of law institutions and beyond the reach of law enforcement. The report addresses the use of sexual violence in conflict as a tactic of war and terrorism, targeting victims based on their actual or perceived ethnic, religious, political or clan affiliation, with the aim of attacking or altering the identity of the group. Sexual violence has been employed by armed and violent extremist groups as a vehicle of persecution, directed in particular towards women and girls of reproductive age, as the perceived transmitters of cultural and ethnic identity. While most incidents of sexual violence perpetrated in wartime continue to be met with impunity, the report identifies some

progress towards combatting cultures of impunity, such as by de-linking rape from adultery in a number of national penal codes.

For the first time, the Myanmar Armed Forces (Tatmadaw) are listed in the report among the parties credibly suspected of committing or being responsible for patterns of rape or other forms of sexual violence in situations of armed conflict on the agenda of the Security Council.

As the Secretary-General has emphasized since the start of his tenure, “the international community spends far more time and resources responding to crises than preventing them. It is critical to rebalance our approach by upholding human rights, ensuring sustainable development and harnessing the power of the participation of women, which makes peace agreements more durable, societies more resilient and economies more dynamic.”

Distinguished members,

I would now like to update you on some relevant developments that took place during the **38th session of the Human Rights Council**:

Regrettably, on 19 June, the United States withdrew from the Human Rights Council alleging that for years, it had engaged in “ever more anti-American and anti-Israel invective”. The High Commissioner expressed his disappointment and surprise, stating that “the US should be stepping up, not stepping back,” given the state of human rights in today’s world. The President of the Human Rights Council, Ambassador Vojislav Šuc of Slovenia, recalled that “in times when the value and strength of multilateralism and human rights are being challenged on a daily basis, it is essential that we uphold a strong and vibrant Council.”

On 21 and 22 June, the Human Rights Council held its **annual full-day discussion on the human rights of women** – with two panels: one on “The impact of violence against women human rights defenders and women’s organizations in digital spaces”, and another on “Advancing women’s rights in the economic sphere through access to and participation in information and communication technologies (ICTs)”.

The **panel on violence against women human rights defenders** was opened by the High Commissioner and moderated by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, your former colleague Dubravka Simonovic. The discussion addressed the heightened risk of women human rights defenders to be targeted or exposed to gender-specific threats or violence, including internet-related violence which is often of a sexualized nature, such as threats of rape, non-consensual dissemination of intimate data and images or cyber stalking. Women human rights defenders face attacks by the public, authorities and community or faith-based leaders and groups, because their work often challenges norms of male supremacy or of dominant racial or religious groups. These attacks are meant to harm their reputation or delegitimize their work, undermining their rights to public participation and to live free from violence.

I had the pleasure to open the **panel on advancing women's rights in the economic sphere through access and participation in information and communication technologies**. I acknowledged the risk of erosion of rights through online violence against women. However, I also stressed that ICTs can provide more affordable and inclusive educational opportunities for girls, including girls with disabilities, especially where schools are far from homes. ICTs can also facilitate access to sexual and reproductive health information where distance, stigma or laws requiring authorization by family members impede access to such services. Moreover, ICTs enable women, including rural women, to run their business by using online financial services, marketing their products and services online and expanding their network.

However, the huge potential of ICTs for women's and girls' economic empowerment is yet to be realised. Both the gender gap in economic participation and the gender digital divide have been widening in the past five years. As States are striving to significantly increase access to information and communications technology and provide universal access to the internet in the least developed countries by 2020 under SDG 9.c, we must instil digital literacy, skills and confidence in girls and women. For this, we must reduce their burden of unpaid domestic and care work and eliminate discriminatory stereotypes that discourage women and girls to pursue education and occupation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. In addition, we must make access to digital assets affordable and safe for them and protect their online presence from violence and harassment.

The following **draft resolutions** are currently before the Council for adoption by the end of this week:

- “Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls”, with a focus this year on women’s and girls’ economic empowerment, with a special subtheme on sexual harassment in the workplace and in schools. The draft resolution welcomes the work undertaken by the International Labour Organization towards the development of a Convention and Recommendation concerning violence and harassment in the world of work. It also calls upon States to ratify or accede to the CEDAW Convention and the Optional Protocol, withdraw or limit the scope of reservations, fully cooperate with the CEDAW Committee and implement its recommendations.
- “Accelerating efforts to eliminate violence against women: Preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in digital contexts”: This resolution reiterates the need to engage with all, including men and boys to prevent and eliminate such violence and the underlying gender stereotypes and recalling SDG 5.b on women’s empowerment through ICTs.
- “The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the internet”: The resolution calls upon States to bridge the gender digital divide and to enhance the use of information and communications technology to promote women and girls’ full enjoyment of their rights.
- “Human rights and climate change”: this resolution recognizes that women are not only victims but also agents of change. It calls for women’s participation in climate change responses and the integration of a gender-responsive approach into climate change adaptation and mitigation policies. While the resolution refers to the CEDAW Convention and the Committee’s 2009 statement on gender and climate change, it does not mention General Recommendation No. 37 (2018) on gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change.

Madame Chair,

Distinguished members,

During this **70th session**, you will conduct dialogues with eight States parties; meet with UNCTs and specialized agencies, other international organizations, NGOs and NHRIs. You will discuss your draft revised reporting guidelines as well as a draft framework of

cooperation with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict; and work on a host of other items related to follow-up, general recommendations, individual communications and inquiries under the Optional Protocol. The Committee will also continue discussing the implementation of GA resolution 68/268 on treaty body strengthening as well as relevant gender-related SDG indicators.

As you clearly have much work ahead of you, I stop here and wish you a most successful and productive session.

Thank you.
