

“Commitments for women’s rights: time to turn empty promises into concrete changes for women”

For over a century, International Women’s Day has marked the economic, social, political and cultural achievements of women around the world. Does the world today have reasons to celebrate progress in fighting violence against women and advancing women’s rights?

While women have increasingly become actors of change in promoting and protecting human rights, violence against women remains the most pervasive expression of discrimination against them and an egregious violation of their human rights. It is unacceptable that 33 years after the adoption of the CEDAW Convention, 20 years after the adoption of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action by the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, and 18 years after the Beijing Platform for Action, diverse and persistent forms of violence continue to affect the lives of millions of women worldwide, thus curtailing the whole range of their human rights and empowerment in all aspects of life, whether in the public, economic, social or family sphere.

It is important to recollect how little of the work of the United Nations was devoted to violence against women before the Vienna Conference. Indeed, the topic was barely addressed during the Nairobi World Conference on Women in 1985, with violence against women being addressed, if at all, from a criminal justice perspective. CEDAW was at the forefront of changing this approach, having become aware of the alarming dimension of the issue through its examination of States parties’ reports which led to its elaboration of General Recommendation 19 (1992) on violence against women. In this landmark general recommendation, CEDAW for the first time established the due diligence obligation of States parties to prevent, investigate and punish acts of gender-based violence. The general recommendation clearly defines gender-based violence as discrimination within the meaning of article 1 of the Convention.

The World Conference on Human Rights was a watershed in terms of women’s human rights, and particularly in relation to the identification of violence against women as not happenstance and a private matter, but an issue of international concern. The conference also declared all human rights as universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated and made clear that while the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms. Gender-based violence and all forms of sexual harassment and exploitation, including those resulting

from cultural prejudice and international trafficking, were then identified as incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person and were to be eliminated, while the human rights of women were to form an integral part of United Nations human rights activities. The outcome document highlighted the equal status of the human rights of women and addressed prominently violence against women.

The Vienna Conference set in motion standard setting and monitoring initiatives including the adoption by the General Assembly of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and the establishment of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences by the then Commission on Human Rights. The Conference also requested CEDAW to examine the possibility of a petitions procedure which led to the adoption of the Option Protocol to the CEDAW Convention in 1999.

Indeed, as we mark this important anniversary and take stock of the last two decades, it is clear that there exists a wide range of standards and mechanisms which can be used to address violence against women. The test question remains: have these made a difference in the lives of women?

Women have invested great hope in the recent transformation of states and societies, playing a crucial role in the struggle for change, often making sacrifices and experience suffering. Yet in times of change, victories for women cannot be taken for granted. “Although political transitions offer a unique opportunity to address inequalities of the past, advance women’s human rights and ensure that equality between women and men is one of the foundations on which the new legal system is built, women who have been active in the fight for democracy and justice find themselves excluded from decision-making in new state-building processes” stated the independent experts. Women and men must therefore remain constantly vigilant that although offering unprecedented opportunities for progress, political transitions do not result in regression and bring new forms of discrimination” the experts warned. There can be no democratic and equal society if women, half of the world population remain discriminated and disenfranchised. When women have appropriated public spaces to exercise their right to freedom of expression, assembly and to participate in public life, they have encountered stereotypes, harassment and violence. Challenging the roles traditionally attributed to women remains essential even when the whole society claims sweeping changes.

Extreme forms of violence, such as killings of women because they are women, whether labelled murder, homicide, femicide, feminicide, or ‘honour’ killings, continue unabated in all continents; these manifestations of violence are

culturally and socially embedded, and continue to be accepted, tolerated or justified - with impunity as the norm,” stressed the independent experts. “The failure of States to guarantee women’s right to a life free from violence, allows for a continuum of violence which can end in their death.”

Gender equality and the empowerment of women have been gaining ground worldwide. The women, from all walks of life, who have struggled throughout history for more rights and greater freedom of choice and liberty, must be applauded and remembered at this historical juncture. Yet when it comes to the boardroom meetings, government sessions, peace negotiations, and other assemblies where crucial decisions are made in the world, women are too often absent. States need to step up efforts if the UN Millennium Development Goals’ target of 30 per cent women in decision-making positions is to be achieved, including by providing for affirmative action and the guarantees of freedom of expression, assembly and association to increase the number of women in politics.

Manifestly more girls are going to school, and are growing up healthier and better equipped to realize their potential. “ The case of the 14 year old school girl Malala Yousufzai who was brutally attacked and shot in the north-western frontier of Pakistan on her way back from school reminds us all of the extreme danger that many girls continue to face in when they claim their right to education” stated the Chairperson of the CEDAW Committee. “CEDAW stressed that enabling girls to enjoy this human right in every region of the world requires dismantling patriarchal barriers and entrenched gender stereotypes”.

Women disproportionately bear the brunt of poverty, war, disease, lack of safe water, and famine. Women living in rural areas and women suffering multiple forms of discrimination because of the intersections of their different identities and characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, migration status, social origin, gender identity and others, remain the most marginalized from development and human rights gains.

While the Commission on the Status of Women deliberates on how to prevent and respond to violence against women, we the expert mechanisms of the UN human rights system cannot but recall that there is a long way to go before women and girls can enjoy equal rights and freedoms as men, as well as respect for their dignity. In the context of the post 2015 development agenda, the role of CEDAW and other players in the elaboration of indicators on violence against women is of paramount importance. In the meantime, States should focus their efforts on the implementation of CEDAW and other relevant instruments. We, therefore, call on Member States to heed the voices of all women and girls

demanding with ever stronger insistence and urgency their human rights. This is now urgent for implementing their rights. We are simply the echo of their voices.

The CEDAW Committee and the following special procedures join this statement: Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context; Working Group on people of African descent; Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia; Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Côte d'Ivoire; Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights; Independent Expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea; Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt and other related international financial obligations of States on the full enjoyment of human rights, particularly economic, social and cultural rights; Special Rapporteur on the right to education; Independent Expert on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment; Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights; Special Rapporteur on the right to food; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Haiti; Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers; Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran; Working Group on the use of mercenaries; Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants; Independent Expert on Minority Issues; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967; Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation & guarantees of non-recurrence; Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance; Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography; Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery; Independent Expert on human rights and international solidarity; Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in the Sudan; Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Somalia; Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial,

summary or arbitrary executions; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism; Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; Special Rapporteur on the human rights obligations related to environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and waste; Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children; Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises; Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice; Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation.
