

HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL – 51st SESSION

Annual discussion on the integration of a gender perspective throughout the work of the Human Rights Council and that of its mechanisms

Theme: Overcoming gender-based barriers to freedom of opinion and expression

26 September 2022

Ms. Peggy Hicks, Director of the Thematic Engagement, Special Procedures and Right to Development Division, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, affirmed in her opening statement that freedom of opinion and expression, as the foundation of every free and democratic society, is essential for the promotion and protection of every human right. The realization of this right has been critical to achieving crucial gains for gender equality. Women play a key role in fighting systemic racial discrimination and the exploitation of indigenous natural resources. They also serve as a driving force for the global climate movement, mobilizing a generation of young people. However, the struggle for gender equality and growing online and offline threats to women and girls continue, including repressive and discriminatory legislation, policies and practices, and religious and cultural norms, stigmatization, harassment, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and ill-treatment, killings, and sexual and gender-based violence used to silence and discredit women who are outspoken as leaders, community workers, human rights defenders and politicians. Gender stereotypes and patriarchal structures continue to perpetuate gender inequality, keeping women in lesser and more submissive roles. Calling for urgent needs to change, Ms. Hicks stated that all these barriers contribute to the progressive exclusion of women and girls from the public and political spheres. This hinders them from playing a transformative role in society.

The first panellist, **Ms. Irene Khan, Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression** highlighted three challenges that women face; gendered censorship by laws, policies, discriminatory practices, social attitudes, cultural and religious norms that suppress, control or punish women's voice online and offline; sexual and gender-based violence, hate speech and disinformation; and unequal access to information. Ms. Khan affirmed that there is a clear and explicit link between the root causes of gender inequality and systemic racism, and the persistence of gendered censorship. Freedom of opinion and expression plays a vital role in the realization not only of women's civil and political rights, but also their economic, social, cultural and environmental rights and social media platforms play a vital role in women's empowerment by enabling them to communicate, advocate, organize and access information. Ms. Khan highlighted a few recommendations, including a gender-sensitive interpretation of the right to freedom of expression and opinion; clear internationally accepted standards on what constitutes online gender-based violence, hate speech and disinformation; and a calibrated approach to ensure that responses by States and companies are aligned with the level of harm or threat.

Ms. Mariana Duarte, Programme Officer, Gender Partnership Programme, Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) stated that the main gender-based barrier to freedom of opinion and expression for women in politics is gendered violence. Violence against women in politics and in parliaments has a direct impact on women's participation and their full contribution to political processes. It prevents them from fully exercising their mandate. This violence jeopardizes democracy and human rights. Ms. Duarte reported evidence, results and outcomes of IPU studies, showing very high percentages of psychological violence against women parliamentarians (over 80%). This violence includes threats of death, rape, beating or abduction, sexual violence and harassment, as well as physical and economic violence. The IPU studies also bring to light how multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination – such as age, disability, minority group status and marital status (particularly being unmarried) – can lead to an exponential increase in gender-based violence against certain women parliamentarians.

Finally, she highlighted the importance of using existing international human rights mechanisms for addressing violence against women in political and public life.

Ms. Julie Posetti, Global Director of Research at the International Center for Journalists, affirmed that gender-based online violence against journalists is one of the most serious contemporary threats to press freedom. It aids and abets impunity for crimes against journalists, including physical assault and murder. It is designed to silence, humiliate and discredit women journalists specifically. Reporting cases documented in India, South Africa, Malta, in the Philippines, and in the United Kingdom, Ms. Posetti highlighted the dangerous trend that correlates online violence with offline attacks, harassment and abuse. Although States are the main duty-bearers in protecting journalists, she reported an absence of effective, rights-respecting regulatory responses as well as a lack of accountability. In conclusion, she listed recommendations to the HRC and its mechanisms for raising awareness of violence against women journalists. These recommendations include monitoring, recording, and publishing evidence, and condemning online violence associated with crimes against women journalists and attacks that implicate governments or political leaders.

Ms. Mitzi Jonelle Tan, Convenor and International Spokesperson, Youth Advocates for Climate Action Philippines focused her presentation on the vital role of education in solving the current climate crisis. She also focused on the issue of societal prejudice and discrimination. Marginalized women need to be empowered with education and information and given space to be active members of the society. Ms. Jonelle Tan affirmed that women environmental defenders across the world face specific threats, including smear campaigns often focused on their private lives, with explicit sexist or sexual content. Sexual violence is also used to silence women defenders, and much of which is underreported. The HRC should prioritize girls' education and for the most marginalized people; investigate human rights violations across the world, especially concerning women; and support and empower women. She concluded in affirming that the fight for climate justice includes gender justice and the fight for women's liberation which will only be complete when all people are free.

Interactive dialogue

20 country delegations took the floor during the interactive dialogue. Countries welcomed the annual debate on the integration of a gender perspective, considering it a great opportunity to share best practices, lessons learned and national strategies. Nevertheless, **Egypt** regretted that the paper reflected a biased view of women's rights by a specific group of countries. This was due to the inclusion of many controversial terms. Most of the countries, including **EU, Cyprus**, and the **Republic of Korea** affirmed that overcoming gender-based barriers to freedom of opinion and expression can be extremely challenging, as often besides being imposed or integrated in discriminatory laws, policies and practices, they are rooted in social attitudes, cultural norms and patriarchal values. It is therefore crucial to break the cycle of reproduction of gender stereotypes which ultimately impact entire societies.

Women and girls' leadership is essential to advancing gender equality. Barriers to the accessibility and utilization of existing and emerging digital technologies, in addition to low digital literacy, continue to prevent women's access to information and their equal and meaningful participation online. These gender digital divides not only undermine the human rights of women and girls but obstruct the realization of an inclusive democracy. **Israel** said that States must ensure that girls and young women have a seat at the decision-making table and policy-making space and ensure that their voices are meaningfully heard. **Afghanistan** spoke of on the human rights situation faced by women and girls in the country saying that the Taliban's policy of systematic discrimination against the population can only be called gender apartheid. To complement the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse, the **U.S.** has established the White House Task Force to Address Online Harassment and Abuse, which is developing policies and programs to address online attacks against women and LGBTQI+ individuals worldwide.

UN Women placed a special emphasis on the panel's topic of gender equality and women's empowerment. Gender stereotypes are at the root of social norms that limit women and girls' participation in public life. Preconceived notions about women's roles have serious consequences for their physical and mental health and contribute to the rise of all forms of violence. UN Women invited the Council to support initiatives to challenge gender stereotypes, shift social norms and create a safe environment where women and girls can thrive. **UNICEF** called on Member States to respect, protect and fulfil the right of all girls to freedom of opinion and expression, including by addressing social and cultural norms that impede the realization of this right and by providing each and every girl with the knowledge, support and protection required to enjoy this right.

NGOs highlighted the effects and consequences of the restrictions on freedom of expression and opinion. Speakers stressed that without an intersectional approach to gender, young people of diverse race, class, ethnicity, indigeneity, religion or belief, physical and mental health, disability, civil status, or socioeconomic and migration status are isolated, their civic space and their meaningful engagement suppressed. Society cannot be equitable if these threats persist. NGOs encouraged the Council to include provisions for young women and girls in the public sphere. They also encouraged the Council to pay special attention to crosscutting intersectionality.

Delegations that took the floor during the Interactive Dialogue (20 country delegations):

EU, Lithuania (on behalf of Nordic-Baltic countries), Chile (on behalf of a group of countries), Slovenia (on behalf of Quadrilateral Group), Bahamas (on behalf of CARICOM Group in Geneva), Netherlands (on behalf of Brazil, Canada, Fiji, Namibia, Sweden), Belgium (on behalf of Groupe des États Membres de la Francophonie), Australia (on behalf of a group of countries), Israel, Egypt, Timor-Leste, (on behalf of community of Portuguese Language countries), Ecuador, Luxembourg, Republic of Korea, Ireland, France, Colombia, Cyprus, Indonesia, United States.

NHRIs and NGOs that took the floor (7):

Federation For Women and Family Planning, Stichting Choice For Youth And Sexuality, Plan International, Stichting Global Human Rights Defence, Arrow, International Development Law Organization, Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS) Asociación Civil.

International organizations (2): UN Women, United Nations Children's Fund

To watch full meeting refer to [UN Web TV](#).