

Virtual Townhall Meeting of Civil Society and United Nations

Secretary-General António Guterres

Commission on the Status of Women

March 16, 2021

Moderated by UN Women Executive Director, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the meeting provided an opportunity for women's civil society organizations to engage with the Secretary-General on the session's priority theme: women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

Opening remarks by the Secretary-General

The SG's priority was not to TALK in this Townhall meeting but to LISTEN to the civil society organizations, so himself and other UN entities could understand and incorporate their requests into future plans and agendas. He noted that the UN is seeing new evidence everyday that Covid has been devastating for women's rights. There are reports that there are now 10,000,000 more child brides. Women are trapped at home with their abusers. There is a huge gender gap in the workforce that needs to be addressed. Male dominated teams will come up with male dominated solutions and this is not acceptable. The Covid crisis can be used to reset, take a pause, and come back with full force on the issues around gender equality. The efficiency and effectiveness of the world's recovery from this pandemic depends on the ability for women to have a voice in how we recover. Gender equality is an issue of power and we live in a male dominated world. When the SG was elected he promised that he would have an equal number of men and women in leadership roles in the UN. He was proud to say that he has achieved this goal. He is asking leaders to focus on the following actions: Women's rights needs to be supported through laws, Take special measures so that women have equal leadership opportunities, Support women economic inclusion, with equal jobs and equal pay, All countries must respond with extreme urgency to the violence that is happening against women and girls. The SG said we should not want to return back to "normal" after the pandemic has passed, normal was discriminatory.

Questions asked by Civil Society Organizations to the Secretary General

- What is the UN doing to address violence and child marriages?
 - SG's answer - It's a dramatic thing that so many girls are forced into marriage, due to poverty and other issues. The increase in child marriage is showing that Covid is dramatically impacting girls much more than boys. Girls are out of schools in astonishing numbers. More and more families and women are going into poverty and because of this they are selling their daughters. Levels of poverty in the world are increasing and

- this directly affects women. The SG is pushing for a global commitment in supporting higher levels of equity. Developing countries are putting trillions into economies but not into these groups of people.
- Hiya Shah - How can we hold states accountable and how can we make sure they are upholding international law?
 - SG's answer - That is the \$1,000,000 question. The UN has some ways that they can do this, like denouncing states or certain actions. Most of the violations against women are not punished. The mechanisms to make states accountable are weak. The UN has policies and strategies but they don't have teeth. We have a gap here and we need to acknowledge that.
 - Cheryl Hayles - How do we create better spaces for women who are in political power? They make it to these roles and then they still need to combat a culture that is sexist and discriminatory.
 - Solange Simoes - What is being done at the UN to promote the role of women in decision making. What's been done to make sure at the end of your term that the next SG is a woman and a feminist?
 - SG's answer - The central question is a question of power. It is the uneven distro of power that allows everything else to happen.. at the family level and political level. How can we fight it? Power must be met with power. We need to mobilize everyone and help even men understand that this is negative for them. He is strongly in favor of the 1/3 quota.. 1/3 of women in power.
 - Everyone is working towards gender equality and I'm ok with that, but in India women don't even have healthcare and we have a huge problem with infantcide. Why isn't the UN focused on Universal healthcare and similar issues to this, instead of gender equality?
 - SG's answer - There are many basic problems in countries, but all of these stem from gender inequality. It is clear that we need to address the basic problems, but it is also clear that when these problems exist women are affected the most. That's why gender equality is a critical goal.

In conclusion, the Secretary General thanked everyone for their participation and questions. Without the role of civil society organizations, the UN wouldn't be able to achieve their goals. Power is not given, it must be taken and we are an instrument in taking power in gender equality.

Report submitted by:

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