

Wairimu Njoya
UNDEF Advisory Board

Remarks at the UNDEF side event during the March 2019 Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women

Thank you honorable ambassadors, distinguished panelists, UNDEF colleagues, and esteemed guests: your support and commitment to strengthening women's human rights demonstrates the continuing importance of multi-level and multi-sector approaches to women's empowerment. This is the approach that UNDEF grantees have consistently taken.

The importance of a multi-pronged approach is well established through academic studies that examine the factors that enhance women's agency and wellbeing. One of the major findings of my own research is that multi-level approaches are key to the effectiveness of women's civil society organizations in different parts of the world. This is particularly true of human rights advocacy that combines informal cultural interventions with formal processes in the legislature or the court system.

Yet, despite this need for variability, we also find that there is a relatively small number of general patterns that we can see emerging when we examine a large number of cases. An analysis of successful interventions to advance women's rights yields some general guidelines that can help us to chart the way forward for women's rights.

One of these general guidelines is the need for women's democratic participation in order to advance women's rights in other areas. Having a strong voice in the democratic process enhances women's ability to be self-determining in the household, in the market, and in the community. Conversely, the struggle to have their voices heard at home, to defend their market spaces from encroachment by others in contested urban spaces, and to shape how things are done in their own neighborhoods gives women a launching pad from which to engage more actively in formal electoral processes and political deliberation.

This is a principle that is consistently imbued in UNDEF's work for women's empowerment. I am therefore especially honored today to introduce a panel of experts who recognize this close linkage: the relationship between democratic participation in the political arena and women's rights that extend well beyond the arena of formal politics. The organizations represented on our panel have demonstrated, through their project design and implementation, that when women participate in electoral or legal processes, they gain the capacity to shift the agenda of governing institutions in order to make them more inclusive of marginalized groups in society. Among these marginalized groups are not only women, whose participation in political leadership is still low in most parts of the world, but also the communities within which women's lives are disproportionately embedded: internally displaced persons, the urban poor, refugees, and survivors of armed conflict.

When women speak about their own daily struggles and bodily pain, especially in post-conflict societies, they make visible the breakdown in governance structures in their society and the need for far-reaching legal and institutional reforms. When young women speak about their vision for the future, especially in emerging democracies, they make visible the generational gap between an older leadership structure—mostly male—and a future that is more egalitarian and respectful of women's rights. In all cases, as our panelists will elaborate, enhancing women's democratic voice is tightly linked to the advancement of women's rights in other aspects of social and economic life.

We have four panelists with us today, and they all represent UNDEF initiatives that build strong synergies between democratic participation and women's human rights.

From Uganda: Rehmah Kasule of the Century Entrepreneurship Development Agency, who will describe her work to strengthen young women's civic participation and leadership (Rehmah joins us today from Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she is currently a fellow at the Harvard Advanced Leadership Initiative);

From Lebanon: Ghida Anani of the Aaad Resource Centre for Gender Equality, who will tell us about strengthening fair legislation for women affected by sexual violence and exploitation;

From Colombia: Alejandro Bonil Vaca of Corporación Opción Legal, who will speak about a project to empower women survivors of armed conflict (Alejandro is currently based at the Columbia School of International and Public Affairs here in New York);

From Sudan: Hala Al-Karib of the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa, who will explain efforts to engage marginalized women in elections.

Our panelists will also tell us how UNDEF's support specifically has strengthened their mission and their work overall.