

Ukrainian Mother Language Day:
A Celebration of Women's Voices
10 March 2017, 1.15-2.30PM
Conference Room 2

Statement of Ms. Catherine Pollard
Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management
Secretariat-wide Coordinator for Multilingualism

Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

1. At the outset, let me congratulate you, Mister Ambassador, for your leadership in raising awareness of the contribution of mother languages in achieving our common goals. I thank you for inviting me to join my voice to yours on this importance matter.
2. As the UN headquarters is getting ready for the opening of the 61st session of the Commission on the Status of Women, next Monday, I am delighted to take part in a discussion that specifically aims at addressing the interconnection between language and gender.
3. Interestingly enough, most nations keep referring to languages received at birth as the mother's language, rather than the father's language. This is seemingly a nearly universal feature across world languages. This demonstrates, if it were needed, the relevance of today's topic.
4. Beyond this anecdote, you are aware that for the past year, I have made a point of explaining the critical contribution made by multilingualism to achieving the goals of the UN, whether it is international peace and security; development; or human rights. I also believe that we must keep in mind that it is the responsibility of the UN Secretariat to mainstream multilingualism into our activities, as a "core value" of the Organisation.
5. In this regard, human rights in general – and women's rights in particular – are no exception. As a matter of fact, languages and women's rights are closely intertwined. Women from minority or indigenous language groups face greater barriers to accessing healthcare and quality education; they are also disproportionately at risk of harmful practices. Women in language minorities also suffer from unequal access to economic resources. They are more likely to be illiterate and be excluded from participatory processes and political representation.

6. But languages are also part – must be part – of the winning equation. Agenda 2030, as the Sustainable Development Goals adopted in 2015 are collectively referred to, aims at “leaving no one behind”. Indeed, I doubt that any of the goals, and any of the targets on Agenda 2030, could be met without integrating the language component.

7. My deep belief is that languages, as a medium of communication, as a vehicle for our thoughts, our policies, our programmes, our information materials, our reports, our deliberations, are certainly key to achieving the Agenda 2030, and in particular goal number 5 “gender equality and empowerment of women and girls”.

8. This is why the UN Secretariat operates on a daily basis in a myriad of languages, not only in its working and official languages, but also in dozens of local languages that best fit the communities that are supposed to be helped by the Sustainable Development Goals. The UN country team in Ukraine maintains a website in Ukrainian language for instance. Only by reaching out to the target audience in a technologically and linguistically accessible manner will we, collectively, achieve the very purpose of our Organization, and implement the mandates from the Member States to the Secretariat. This is why, as Coordinator for multilingualism, I avail myself of every opportunity to raise awareness, both internally with the UN, and externally with all stakeholders, about the importance of multilingualism as an enabler of our multilateral system. And this is why I have the pleasure to be with you today.

9. I must thank you in this regard, Mr. Ambassador Volodymyr Yelchenko, for inviting me to address this critical question. It is my hope that the film presentation and cultural performances that we will see today will further prove my case, while also giving the audience the opportunity to hear the beauty and specificities of the Ukrainian language. I thank you and wish you a delightful event.

10. Thank you!