

Informal Plenary Meeting
“Gender Equality and Women's Leadership for a Sustainable World”
A Panel Discussion with the President's Group of Gender Equality Leaders
15 July 2019, ECOSOC Chamber, United Nations Headquarters

Informal Summary

I. Introduction

H.E. Ms. María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés, President of the 73rd session of the United Nations General Assembly, on 15 July 2019, convened an Informal Plenary Meeting on **“Gender Equality and Women's Leadership for a Sustainable World”**. The Informal Plenary Meeting was convened in the framework of the second meeting of the President’s Gender Equality Leaders Group. and was aimed at identifying best practices required for the implementation of key actions that are needed to accelerate women's empowerment.

The Informal Plenary Meeting consisted of an Opening Segment, two Interactive Panel Discussions on: Panel I – “Women's Leadership - a Call for Action”; and Panel II – “Gender Equality and Inclusive Societies for Sustainable Development”, and a Closing Segment. The meeting, which witnessed the active participation of Member States, civil society and other stakeholders, afforded the participants the opportunity to share good practices and engage in substantive discussion on gender equality and women’s empowerment.

II. Summary of the Discussion

Opening Segment

In her opening remarks, **H.E. Ms. María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés**, President of the 73rd session of the United Nations General Assembly, underlined the necessity of facilitating full participation and leadership of women in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). She stated that significant progress had been made in terms of women’s participation in development since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action. The number of female parliamentarians had doubled and about 50% of countries globally now provided financial access to women. She, however, remarked that the landscape had become more challenging for women, taking into account the prevalence of suffocating stereotypes and discriminatory laws, including at the workplace. A significant proportion of women still work under very difficult situations. She further underscored the pervasiveness of discrimination against women, for example, stressing that not all women had equal access to financial services and land ownership. She remarked that in order to promote women’s empowerment, it would be necessary to continue to pay particular attention to the issues of gender equality. The President called on participants to use the discussion as a forum to recommit to the agenda of gender equality and women’s empowerment and make significant progress on those issues, especially in the lead up to Beijing+25.

H.E. Ms. Mona Juul, Vice President of the Economic and Social Council, highlighted the centrality of women and girls in poverty eradication efforts. She underscored the importance of

gender equality in the achievement of SDG 17. Promoting gender equality required all-of-societies approach rather than the sole responsibility of women and girls. She also stated that women and girls were disproportionately affected by unemployment and that it was critical to provide adequate funding that would enable them to develop their skills and capacity. She noted that such measures enabled women and girls to take decisions that impact positively on their lives and future.

Ms. Amina J. Mohammed, Deputy Secretary General of the United Nations, applauded the call by the President of the General Assembly to promote the women's agenda while reaffirming the centrality of gender equality in achieving the SDGs and acknowledged the timeliness of the plenary meeting. She underscored that efforts to promote inclusivity for women should cover decision-making process in all institutions, including militaries and parliaments. She observed that the inclusion of women in societies is crucial in terms of basic democratic rights. She highlighted upcoming UN events celebrating women-related issues, including the 25th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), noting that the meeting heralded the start of the Ministerial Segment of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. She bemoaned the slow progress in achieving gender equality, expressing concern about laws and rules that hinder the participation of women in society and in achieving the SDGs.

Panel I - Women's Leadership - A Call for Action

This panel was chaired and moderated by H.E. Mr. Jürg Lauber, Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the United Nations and comprised the following panelists:

- Ms. Helen Clark, Former Prime Minister of New Zealand and former Administrator of United Nations Development Programme;
- Ms. Isabel Plá, Minister of Women and Gender Equality of Chile;
- Ms. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women;
- Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron, President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union;
- Ms. Rebeca Grynspan, Ibero-American Secretary General; and
- Ms. Melanne Verwee, Director of the Georgetown University Institute for Women, Peace and Security.

Key Messages

Women in Leadership Position

Panelists stressed the imperative of more women in leadership position. They declared that time had come for broad consensus on ensuring that women take active part in the decision-making process across all sectors by identifying the following areas for urgent interventions:

- More women were needed at various leadership levels, particularly organizational structures and institutions, including militaries and parliaments, through redoubled efforts.
- Enhanced efforts needed to be taken globally to reduce the gender gap. The current process for promoting gender equality was recognized as being too slow.
- Gender equality was considered as both an economic and human rights issue. The potential benefit of having gender equality in the world economy was considered very significant.

- The private sector could play a major role in promoting gender equality by keeping women in high-level management and having mandatory quotas for women in leadership positions.

Call to End Violence Against Women

Panelists stressed the necessity of addressing issues of gender-based violence and the centrality of adopting a common agenda to address the problem:

- There is a pressing need for action to end violence against women, including those targeted at women in politics. Gender equality should be among the important goals of a democratic government. Women need to be encouraged to run for public office. This would require commitment and support from political parties which could put women in electable positions. Leaders were encouraged to include women in their cabinets especially as women leaders can be inspirational figures for the younger generation.
- Zero tolerance for violence against women in politics needs to be upheld to ensure participation of women in politics.
- Key lessons learned were that women must always make effort not to be intimidated or frightened and should continue making their voices heard. Affirmative action was considered not as an underestimation of women, rather an effort to take down barriers that prevent gender equality. Women must imbibe a culture of support for themselves and inspire other women, as well as creating role models for younger generation.

Necessity of Affirmative Action in Promoting Gender Equality.

Adoption of affirmative action to strengthen the gains of gender equality was considered as unavoidable for the realization of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In that connection, panelists underscored that:

- Women were still lagging behind in all SDGs. After almost 25 years of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the goal of creating gender equality had not matched the obvious results on ground. Therefore, more efforts were needed to overcome obstacles and expedite gender equality.
- Promoting gender equality should no longer be seen as solely as a women's movement. It should involve all members of the society while the existing gender gap in governments needs to be addressed by paying particular attention to the issue.
- Ensuring gender parity through the establishment of minimum quotas for women in parliament is needed to ensure participation of women.

Intergenerational Cooperation in Advancing Women Issue.

Intergenerational dialogues and cooperation were identified as crucial for achieving the aims of gender equality and empowerment of women, especially in the light of the low participation of women in national development due to varying degrees of obstacles. Panelists, thus, stressed inter alia that:

- Large majority of members of parliament in the world were men, and only less than 15 countries have gender balanced cabinets. Therefore, women need to be more represented and should be directly involved in championing their causes and defending their interest.
- Laws that stereotype and discriminate against women need to be replaced.

- Participation of young people is crucial in the process of promoting gender equality. The commemoration of Beijing + 25 is considered as an opportunity to highlight intergenerational cooperation in advancing women's issues. The momentum must be maintained.
- Strong grassroots level support is needed to ensure the availability of capable women candidates to fill public offices, and to get involved in making change in their societies.
- Ensuring participation of women in leadership is also ensuring good governance.

Women in Peace and Security.

The adoption of the Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security was considered by the panelists as a significant milestone and watershed moment in addressing women's security concerns. Therefore, realistic efforts were needed to drive home the following:

- Women need to be more represented in negotiations that seek to end conflict and ensure sustainable peace. Mediation processes need to be inclusive. Women play an important role in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction.
- Lack of women at negotiation tables affect the maintenance of new democratic institutions that resulted from peace negotiations.

Interactive Discussion

In the interactive discussion that followed the discussions, a number of interventions underscored the importance of women's involvement in decision-making and the widening of the scope for women in all spheres of endeavors. A call to action capable of addressing some of the issues with implementable affirmative actions is considered crucial for women's equal participation. Some key conclusions are:

- Emphasis on education for women to equip them with knowledge and skills that they can use through their life cycle. Besides access to education, the content material of education is also crucial to avoid stereotyping and discrimination. The international community needed to consider education as a focused priority in ensuring gender parity, in the context of development assistance.
- Greater involvement of women in new industries that are related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics was a priority.
- Targeted allocation of services to women was identified as one of the effective ways to ensure gender equality. In some countries, enabling a quota system could help ensure adequate representation of women in the executive, legislature and judiciary.

Panel II - Gender Equality and Inclusive Societies for Sustainable Development

This panel was moderated by H.E. Ms. Valentine Rugwabiza, Permanent Representative of Rwanda to the United Nations and comprised:

- H.E. Ms. Ana Afonso Dias Lourenço, First Lady of Angola;

- Ms. Natalia Mikhailovna Vodianova, United Nations Population Fund Goodwill Ambassador;
- Mr. Guy Ryder, General Director of the International Labour Organization;
- Ms. Martha Delgado, Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mexico;
- Ms. Folly Bah Thibault, Principal Presenter of Al Jazeera English; and
- Ms. Sofia Borges, Senior Vice-President of the UN Foundation.

Key Messages

Role of education and media in creating and preserving mindset

Participants recognized the role of education in facilitating gender equality and empowerment of women and agreed that media had a crucial role to play in molding positive mindset that could crystalize positive actions:

- Promoting gender equality should develop from changing the mindset of society about women. Having a large number of women leaders would require changing perceptions about women.
- Media has a significant role in bringing forward accomplished women leaders. Greater exposure of women leaders would create a better understanding in society and more acceptance. Promoting education was highlighted as the first immediate action to be taken to shape mindset.
- The various international instruments such as conventions on women have not been able to successfully achieve gender equality. More efforts and visibility around gender equality is still needed.
- Eradicating illiteracy is an effective method to alleviate poverty. Completion of primary and secondary school should be available to all boys and girls. Access to university should also be available to all by 2030.

Combatting violence and harassment.

Development of relevant international mechanisms was recognized as crucial to combating violence. Recognition was given to a number, including:

- The International Labour Organisation's new convention and recommendations to combat violence and harassment in the workplace. This new convention provides a common definition of violence and harassment. It includes a variety of behaviours such as physical, emotional and sexual violence. Member states were encouraged to ratify the new convention in the coming months.
- The International Labour Organisation's transformative agenda that emphasizes its recommitment to the agenda of gender equality. In this context, while noting that the principle of providing equal pay for men and women workers has existed for a hundred years, they agreed that the full implementation of this principle still needs to be pushed.

Gender dimension of economic development and access to financing.

In considering the gender dimension of economic development and access to financing, panelists posited that:

- Poverty does have a gender dimension. Therefore, efforts to eradicate poverty should be linked to gender concerns. In some societies, they stressed that women played a crucial

role in certain industries such as garment, and food production and that specific support should be given to breastfeeding women and women with pregnancy especially as that could have meaningful impact on the economy.

- Macroeconomic policies should be made in consultation with women.
- Women entrepreneurs need to be given access to credit and collateral-free loans to give them opportunity to develop their business.
- Enabling women participation in the economy could be in the form of ensuring work-life balance by enabling services such as day-care centers, maternity leave with pay, paid vacations, and other support to women.
- Women entrepreneurs play a significant role in development due to their ability to transform rural, local and urban economies. They need support to access credit and capital, and discrimination-free environment to flourish. Women entrepreneurs also have a role in reconciling family life with business.

Interactive discussion

At the ensuing interactive session following the discussion, various interventions were made highlighting that:

- More women leaders are required for elective positions globally.
- Access to mental health services in workplace needs to be addressed. Protection from violence and harassment in the workplace is crucial for ensuring women's participation in the labour force. Some countries still need to provide centers to help women who are victims of violence.
- Child marriage tradition must be ended.

Closing Session:

H.E. Ms. Maria Fernanda Espinosa Garcés, reiterated the importance of maintaining the momentum to place gender equality in the forefront of the agenda of the United Nations. She stressed that lessons learned from different parts of the world on how to catalyze gender equality and empowerment of women could serve as evidence that the SDGs would be only realized through the participation of women. She extended her appreciation to the Group of Gender Equality Leaders, panelists, and participants for their contributions which greatly enriched the meeting while expressing hope that the discussion would provide meaningful contribution to the upcoming events related to the SDGs.

--oOo--