

Report on the 61st session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)
New York City, USA (13-24 March, 2017)

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The 61st session of the CSW had as a key focus the issue of women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work. The session ended on Friday, March 24th, with the adoption of the agreed conclusions. A wide range of side events (organised by UN Member States) and parallel events (organised by NGOs), over 290 all in all, have been held alongside the discussions in the General Assembly and the consultations on the text from the agreed conclusions.¹ Estimates regarding the number of registered participants to this year's session range between 8,500 and 9,000, while more than 3,900 of these were NGO representatives from 138 countries.²

In the beginning of the session, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres delivered a key note speech, drawing attention to the current global situation, in which women are suffering continuous assaults on their safety and dignity. He stressed that a key element of extremist ideologies which are being enforced in several corners of the world, is the subjugation of women and girls and the denial of their rights. Hence, sexual violence, forced marriage, human trafficking and virtual enslavement are consistently being used as weapons of physical and psychological warfare in today's world. Furthermore, laws that curtail women's freedoms are being enacted in certain states, while others are removing legal protections against domestic violence. Discrimination against women and grave infringements upon their basic human rights were said to sound a loud alarm that our common values are under threat. Hence, *women's rights are human rights – and attacks on women are attacks on all of us*.

The Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo Ngcuka, touched upon the urgent need to respect and protect women's sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, and ensure the unmet needs of family planning for women are met everywhere across the globe. She emphasized that one of the most significant barriers which stubbornly remains in place is the under-representation of women in decision-making at all levels, thus hindering their empowerment. Moreover, a myriad of discriminatory laws exists in more than 150 countries that discriminate against women.

To begin with, a set of side events looked at the issue of violence against women (VAW), intimate-partner violence (IPV) and domestic abuse, including national and regional mechanisms which can improve the implementation of existing legal instruments protecting

¹ Agreed Conclusions to the 61st session of the Commission on the Status of Women, available at: http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/61/csw61_agreed_conclusions_advance_unedited_version_2_4_march_2017.pdf?vs=3358

² <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/csw/participant-voices>

the rights of women and girls and addressing these forms of violence. The implementation of SDG (Sustainable Development Goal) number 5, which strives to ensure gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls has been stressed during the discussions, together with the necessity to tackle VAW at the workplace, including psychological violence, as gender-based violence can take multiple forms. The Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its causes and consequences (SRVAW), Dubravka Šimonovic, argued that there should be stronger cooperation between global and regional mechanisms to defend women's rights and called for an intensification of efforts to prevent VAW and femicide. One of the current shortcomings identified was a fragmentation of human rights monitoring and implementation of relevant instruments. She also urged all Member States to establish Femicide Watches in every country, i.e. femicide monitoring bodies, which can act as a prevention mechanism, identifying existing gaps in national criminal justice, prevention and intervention systems. Various groups of states, such as the G77+China and GRULAC (the Latin American and Caribbean Group), reiterated this call on the need to invest more in prevention efforts to combat VAW and eradicate femicide. Indigenous, migrant and differently-abled women were identified as vulnerable groups. The representative of the GRULAC countries also warned about the feminization of poverty and pointed out that femicide and trafficking in women are one of the biggest problems encountered in the region. Hence, women's economic empowerment and the elimination of VAW are inextricably linked to each other. The African group of countries emphasized that societies should create decent jobs for all women, whereby it is important to promote women's entrepreneurship and use their right to education as a catalyst to the implementation of the SDGs.

Among other issues discussed during the various side events, a study conducted in Nicaragua towards the end of the 1990s entitled "Candies in Hell"³, which analysed the lives of women living with violence, brought up the need to undertake a holistic, multi-stakeholder approach when tackling violence. The study was undertaken again 20 years after the initial investigating period to assess the impact of interventions and results have been quite startling. Therefore, when the government together with all actors in society cooperate to ensure the elimination of VAW, a decrease in IPV of up to 50% can be recorded in one generation, as demonstrated by the aforementioned study. Hence, focusing on violence alone is insufficient, as all expressions of gender inequality ought to be taken into consideration. Such integrated approaches tackling VAW have been promoted as best practices by various speakers.

The Istanbul Convention and its monitoring group GREVIO was also promoted as a best practice, being the most comprehensive legal instrument to date addressing VAW, which in spite of being a new-comer at the international level, can serve as a source of inspiration for all states. Gender stereotypes and sexism were singled out as the biggest problems currently faced in Europe. Globally, the fact that not all regions are fully committed to the universality

³ Ellsberg, Mary, et.al (2000), 'Candies in Hell', *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 51(11), pp. 1595-1610, available at: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.473.5453&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

of women's human rights was highlighted as something which has stymied the process of combatting VAW and empowering all women and girls. Child marriage, women's sexual and reproductive rights, including protection from FGM, and equality of women within the family are areas which should be prioritized by all states in their efforts to tackle VAW in order to convey a more powerful message and ensure coherence.

The need for accurate and comparable data on all manifestations of VAW, including femicide, was highlighted as a priority by various Member States. Recommendations given in this respect touched upon the need for states to establish platforms for information and data collection, and use similar indicators. The Panama Protocol, developed by UN Women in consultation with states from Latin America, was also promoted as a best practice which sets out an extensive protocol for the investigation and prosecution of femicide cases, laying down a set of responsibilities for states to pursue, in accordance with the principle of due diligence.

A side event on femicide organised by the Government of Chile, UN Women and the SRVAW raised awareness on recent policy developments from Chile and El Salvador to combat femicide and touched upon existing tools and good practices in the field. The Minister of Women's Affairs and Gender Equity from Chile, Ms. Claudia Pascual, spoke about the inclusive and participatory measures undertaken in her country to eradicate femicide, highlighting that all ministries and state departments, including the police, the education and health care systems, must work together to publicly condemn femicide, prosecute perpetrators and implement adequate preventive interventions. Chile and El Salvador are also among the 16 countries from Latin America which have adopted specific laws tackling the crime of femicide.

A side event organised by Georgia and the SRVAW looked at existing laws in Georgia addressing VAW, including femicide. It was stated that domestic violence is still regarded as a private matter in many parts of the country, abuse being often not reported or under reported, and women continue being killed by their intimate partners. The Government has taken steps in recent years to harmonise national legislation, ensuring that it is in line with provisions from the Istanbul Convention and CEDAW. A government survey on VAW also recently uncovered the fact that FGM is a serious problem encountered in rural areas.

Child marriage, and so called early unions⁴, together with child pregnancies were identified as issues which ought to be prioritized by state interventions addressing VAW in Latin America, together with a need to increase investments in girls. A side event organised by the Governments of Panama and Guatemala looked at the problem of child marriage and early unions in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). The Montevideo Strategy for the implementation of the regional gender agenda within the Sustainable Development

⁴ The term applies to informal unions affecting girls below the age of 18. Under such circumstances girls are protected by neither customary nor civil laws. Many of the health and social consequences related to child marriage apply also to girls in a relationship of cohabitation with a man, which is often significantly older.

Framework by 2030⁵ recognises these as obstacles to the free exercise of girls' rights. According to the UNICEF global database, the prevalence of child marriage and early unions in LAC is of 23%, lower than Central and Eastern Africa (36%) but higher than the Middle East and North Africa.⁶ The highest prevalence rates in LAC can be observed in Nicaragua, Dominican Republic, Brazil, Honduras and Mexico. In Mexico, this problem is often encountered in indigenous communities. If current trends are allowed to continue, it is estimated that by 2030 approximately 9.7 million girls will be affected by child marriage in LAC.

In sum, the following actions have been put forward as promising practices to ensure the elimination of VAW: creating a culture of zero tolerance towards VAW, adopting policies addressing VAW which are inclusive and participatory, educating boys and girls in matters related to gender equality, including all women into the labour market and closing the gender wage gap.

⁵ Available at: <http://repositorio.cepal.org/handle/11362/41013>

⁶ <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>