

Remarks on “Using gender inclusive communication in the work of Vienna-based intergovernmental bodies”

Thank you for allowing me to say a few short words you on this issue. At this point it is customary for a man speaking at an event about gender to say something about the women in his own life and how they have made him care about gender equality – and in my case I have very good credentials with not just a wife but three daughters too. In truth though, I would worry about someone who only started to care about women and gender equality after the arrival of a third daughter. That person would require a particularly intensive communication regime from us.

When it comes to how we communicate here in Vienna, there are two things we need to keep in mind:

- What we want to say, the content
- And how we actually communicate it, the channels we use

In some ways, improving our content and our language is the easy part. We can change “chairman” to “chair” and pat ourselves on the back for a job well done, but if we stop there we will never achieve deeper change. We need to interrogate the assumptions which lie below the surface – are we using gender neutral language but nonetheless assuming that engineers will be men and nurses will be women, and allowing those assumptions to influence how we communicate?

And building on that critical approach to our own beliefs and assumptions, we need to go further and think about the channels we use – are we communicating via email, over social media, via livestream, and who do we reach through these channels? When it comes to in-person communication, are we sending gender-balanced delegations to attend meetings, and are we making sure our meetings finish on time, to support the participation of those with caring responsibilities? People who are not in the room cannot contribute to the discussion. Any approach to gender-inclusive communication must prioritise and maximise inclusive participation. A question for all of us, myself included, is whether we prioritise gender as much in our actions as we do in our statements – and no communications strategy should count as gender-inclusive if it’s not supported by real action.

I also want to point out that communication is not a one-way process, akin to shouting into a megaphone. It’s a dialogue, something that involves receiving information as well as disseminating our own messages. We often hear that women should speak up, lean in – all too rarely are we urged to listen, to take in what someone wants to tell us. But as diplomats, we know that in order to act effectively and do our jobs well, it’s sometimes more important to listen, absorb and respond to someone else than it is to list off our own priorities and goals. We need to think about how we can build options for dialogue into how we communicate – how would we know if we were effectively communicating with women as well as men? How would we receive that feedback?

I also want to use this opportunity to call for nuance and sophistication in our communication around gender. I'm deeply supportive of the fact that each year at the CND and CCPCJ there are so many resolutions and initiatives which seek to recognise the vulnerability of women and girls to various forms of crime. But we need to be careful that our awareness of women's vulnerability doesn't lead us to define them as always vulnerable, effectively victims in waiting. We must consider how we can protect, support and empower women and girls without framing them as weak and powerless until we intervene, and the way we communicate is key to achieving this.

And moving on from there, we need to recognise that "gender" is not a synonym for "women". Men are also deeply and negatively affected by the gendered societies we all live in. The report on World Crime Trends at the CCPCJ this year drew attention to the fact that men make up the majority of victims of crime, yet we dedicate far too little time to thinking and talking about the ways in which men and boys are particularly vulnerable. To look at just one element of the work done at the UNODC, in our discussions of trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants, we are aware of how the specific gendered vulnerabilities of girls and women can make them potential victims at one point in their lives, and potential perpetrators at another. We need to extend this same level of nuance to men and boys who not only make up the majority of victims of crime, but also the majority of perpetrators, prisoners and police.

I'm afraid I've brought more questions than answers this morning and complicated the problem rather than offering solutions, so I will wrap up here. I look forward to hearing from the many experts in this room on how we can tackle this together.