

Beijing+25 - JOINT CND & CCPCJ VIRTUAL EVENT

June 12, 2020

- The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is often referred to as the “most progressive blueprint for addressing women’s rights ever”. It marked a fundamental shift in how the international community looks at women: It established once and for all that “women’s and girl’s rights are human rights”.
- Beijing also made it clear that women are not vulnerable objects, in need of protection by law against violence, discrimination and the denial of their fundamental rights, but powerful agents of change.
- The Human Rights Council has done important/extensive work on standard-setting and creating a better understanding about what it means that “women’s and girl’s rights are human rights”.
- In its’ resolutions (especially on “Violence against Women”; “Discrimination against Women”; “Female Genital Mutilation” and “Preventing Maternal Mortality”) the Council specified concepts such as “intimate partner violence”, “bodily autonomy and integrity”, “shared responsibility of men and women for sexual behavior and it’s consequences” and many more. It also defined female genital mutilation as a human rights violation. The Council’s resolutions on women’s rights are used by civil society organizations around the world as tools for their advocacy work.
- It was important for me, during my time as president of the Council, to do more on mainstreaming gender equality in it’s work. Not at least because I think that only equal participation of women and men in decision making can guarantee that women’s rights are fully taken into account – we also have sufficient empirical evidence that a diversity of voices in decision making leads to better decisions altogether.
- I therefore appointed a gender focal point who will, by the end of the year, present recommendations on where the Human Rights Council needs to improve when it comes to women’s participation.

- As we have heard from previous speakers, COVID-19 and the restrictions that were put in place to combat the pandemic have led to an increase in violence against women and, more generally, violations of women’s human rights.
- As president of the Human Rights Council I considered it important that the Council speaks out with one voice on the human rights implications of COVID-19 as soon as possible.
- The Human Rights Council, like the whole UN multilateral system, was faced with a number of challenges in this new situation where no physical meetings could be held. We were, in many ways, on uncharted territory and had to find new methods to negotiate and formally adopt a decision by a silence procedure.
- Nonetheless, on May 29 the Human Rights Council adopted by consensus a **Presidential Statement** that appeals to States to ensure that human rights are at the front and centre of national responses to the pandemic.
- The decision also, importantly, recognizes the need for a **gender-responsive approach** to measures combatting COVID-19.
*(Deeply concerned that the COVID-19 pandemic perpetuates and exacerbates existing inequalities, and that those most at risk are persons in vulnerable and marginalized situations, including older persons, migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons, persons with disabilities, persons belonging to minorities, indigenous peoples, persons deprived of their liberty, homeless persons and persons living in poverty, and recognizing the need to ensure non-discrimination and equality while stressing the importance of age- and **gender-responsive** and disability-sensitive measures in this regard)*
- It is, of course, a pity that the Council has to work under such difficult circumstances at a moment when the international community was supposed to use the momentum and reaffirm the commitments made in Beijing.
- In February, when the Council held a **High Level Panel Discussion on Beijing+25**, one message came out very strongly: countries from all regions voiced their concern about the roll-back on women’s rights around the world and the resurgence of narratives against gender equality.
- Also during the February session of the Council **Secretary General Guterres** presented his “Call for Action for Human Rights“, which finds very clear words on women’s rights and calls on all countries to ensure sexual and reproductive health and rights and strive for women’s equal representation and participation in all spheres.

- There are **many areas that we have come to better understand over the past 25 years** – issues that were mentioned in Beijing, but not fully developed.

These include: The impact of **climate change** on women; the impact of **sexual and gender-based harassment** and violence in the workplace on women’s economic participation; the need for greater protection of **female human rights defenders**; the impact of sexual and gender-based **violence and harassment online** on women’s connectivity and use of digital technologies; the need for protection of **female journalists**; the impact of **algorithms** that involuntarily discriminate against women or expose women to **gender-based privacy infringements**; the risks of **gender-bias in medicine**; or the **“feminization” of poverty**; and the need for **comprehensive sexuality education** and **adolescent friendly SRHR services**.

- There are initiatives by the Human Rights Council on most of these questions. Some of them, like the human rights impact of new technologies, climate change or inequality are among the “frontier issues” for human rights identified by High Commissioner Bachelet. I am optimistic that the HRC will continue to play an important role in deepening our understanding of the commitments made in Beijing and applying them to a world that has significantly changed over the last 25 years.
- UN women speaks about a **“shadow pandemic”** when it comes to the global increase in domestic violence amid the COVID-19 health crisis. I think that the pandemic has, in quite a brutal way, exposed inequalities and power relations in our societies that were always there but maybe a bit covered.
- I think that this is also an opportunity: Now that we have seen how fragile the progress we’ve made over the last 25 years for women’s rights is in the light of a major crisis, maybe we are obliged to take a closer look at the underlying, more systemic causes of women’s rights violations.