

Human rights Council 51st Regular Session

ANNUAL DISCUSSION ON INTEGRATION OF A GENDER PERSPECTIVE (HRC res. 6/30)

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Observation of the Panel Discussion on Integration of a Gender Perspective - 23rd Meeting as part of the 51st Regular Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council

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September 12 marked the opening of the 51st Regular Session of the Human Rights Council, where I had the privilege of observing several sessions virtually. In particular, the panel discussion at the twenty-third meeting was part of an annual discussion on integration of a gender perspective, with focus of the theme being, “Overcoming gender-based barriers to freedom of opinion and expression.” The panel started with an opening statement by Ms. Peggy Hicks (Director of the Thematic Engagement, Special Procedures and Right to Development Division, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) where she states that “Freedom of expression and opinion is the foundation of every free and democratic society. It is essential for the promotion and protection of every human right”. This sentiment is echoed across the panelists and speakers across the session, with many identifying the critical role that women play in fighting for gender equality and driving the conversations on complex issues such as climate change.

A common theme that struck me throughout the meeting is the extent by which women are continually silenced in their freedom of expression, even amidst a growing increase in women participation on online and offline movements via more notably the “Me Too” movement. Understandably, more can be done in encouraging women participation and there would be negative consequences on women’s involvement, but I was not aware of how far-reaching and extensive these consequences were until attending the session, with these impacts being aptly described by Ms. Hicks as “an epidemic of sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls”.

Across the various panelists and speakers, many outlined the correlation between the root causes of gender inequality; such as gender and patriarchal stereotypes, negative social norms and systemic racism

to the degradation of women's freedom of expression. Incidents where women are silenced with the ultimate aim of excluding them from equal participation in private and public spaces are becoming more commonplace, especially with the increasing dependence on online platforms such as social media, with reports highlighting the combined rise in online violence of women and their corresponding offline attacks in connection to these online violence cases.

Ms. Irene Khan (Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression) pointed out the 3 challenges hindering the move towards freedom of opinion and expression - the first being the pervasive nature of gender censorship where women's voices are suppressed, controlled and punished online and offline explicitly through laws, policies and discriminatory practices by states, as well as implicitly through social attitudes, cultural and religion norms and patriarchal values. She outlined how the state and society are complicit in the promotion of gender censorship and the increasing urgency for governments to abolish laws and practices of gender censorship as well as to lead the charge in dismantling the structural and systemic roots of gender discrimination.

The second challenge emphasized the disproportionate price that women and girls have to bear when speaking out on their ideas, with many means being employed to exclude women from equal participation in private and public spaces while also undermining their ability to obtain information and speak out about or disseminate their ideas. One such example would be the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence used as a weapon to silence and discredit women and their ideas across multiple industries - from politicians, leaders, civil society, community workers and human rights activists to name a few. Amidst the rise of the digital space, there have been an increasing number of attacks on women in these platforms through gender-based violence or targeted hate speech with the intention of undermining their freedom of expression and more importantly, their rights as women and human beings. There is an increasing need for all stakeholders to be a part of this conversation, with non-state actors and social media platforms being identified as needing to implement stricter regulations in order to enforce and make digital spaces be safe and accessible to women. Some solutions recommended throughout the session include having gender sensitive interpretation towards the right of freedom of expression and opinion, and implementation of clear and internationally accepted standards on what constitutes online gender-based violence to serve as a benchmark for these platforms.

Lastly, Ms. Khan touched on the issue of unequal access to information on the internet, with the issue affecting the right to information for women's freedom of expression. Together with non-state actors, governments have to look into the implementation of safeguards and promotion of women's access to

information, eventually having a spill-over effect onto other aspects of improving overall well-being of women, such as the improvement of digital literacy and education in the longer term.

Throughout the session, the common struggle was the continual existence of gender stereotypes and patriarchal structures in perpetuating gender inequality and confining women to lesser and more submissive roles. Longer-term solutions to tackle these stereotypes brought up in the session include the adoption of special measures for improving social protection and the integration of gender equality in education. Overall, my experience of attending this session has served to further educate me in the current landscape and the challenges preventing the advancement towards gender equality, and how the solutions implemented in overcoming gender-based barriers are vital components in the overall human rights of women and girls globally. Additionally, it gave me a glimpse of the current transition that governments and various stakeholders alike have to engage and cooperate across sectors - whether it's local government and international organizations or non-state actors, everyone has a role to play in the combined fight towards the promotion of women's rights and ensuring that we are continually moving a step forward into the future of equality for all.