

WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR **PEACE & FREEDOM**



High Level Thematic Debate UN@70 - Human Rights at the center of the Global Agenda

12th and 13th July 2016

Trusteeship Council Chamber

On July 12-13, 2016, the President of the General Assembly, Mogens Lykketoft, organised a High-Level Thematic Debate of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly focused on Human Rights. This debate was held to mark the 50th anniversary of the International Human Rights Covenants, the 30th anniversary of the Declaration on the Right to Development and the process to appoint the next UN Secretary-General. The event built on one of the three pillars of the United Nations, human rights. It examined how to reinforce the foundations of the international human rights framework, as well as how human rights can contribute to peace, security and sustainable development.

The event brought together representatives of Member States, observers, UN entities, civil society organizations, research institutions with global and regional reach, media, and other stakeholders to discuss ways to design strategies to strengthen UN's role on this area as well as the improvement of human rights situation globally. The candidates to become the next Secretary-General were also invited. The two-day event included an opening segment, a plenary debate with ministerial participation and interactive segments on three areas of focus.

On July 12th, Mr. Lykketoft opened the High-Level Thematic Debate. He made clear that the culture of human rights forged over the past 70 years is unraveling, and that we must not allow that. He added that looking at the trends that restricted civil society is a key component for ensuring accountability and democracy in all states.

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, then spoke, focusing on the continuing economic and social divide between people in Asia, Europe and the Middle East. He highlighted the plight of refugees around the world, saying: "Refugees face bias and barbed wires." He condemned governments who refuse progress and ignore the frustration and fear of their community. "In our connected world, we all need human rights for peace and prosperity because repressive policies make no one safe," he said. "When governments take action under the guise of 'counter-terrorism,' they reinforce feelings of exclusion and increase resentment and grievances."

H.M. Queen Mathilde of Belgium advocated for a coordinated effort between the private sector, enterprises, UN agencies, CSOs, and the UN Global Compact in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Stakeholders have a role to play in the achieving good governance, education for women and girls and the struggle against inequality, she said.

Executive Director of Illaramatak Community Concerns in Kenya, Agnes Leifla Ntikaampi, then addressed the numerous resolutions and meetings that have occurred over the year and asked, "all these anniversaries but what have we achieved?" She led a call to action to prosecute those who commit human rights abuses, call out governments who repress civil society and be cognisant not to rest on our progress of gender balance, since there is still so far to go. "Human rights abuses

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continue unabated and worrying trends of rising of homophobia and xenophobia. We still have a gender imbalance and we haven't achieved 50/50 balance,” she said. “There is a lack of health care and education. Young girls getting married at 12, mutilated and married off without health care, education or fulfilling her potential.”

Other speakers included the representatives of the European Union, Senegal, Sweden, Guatemala, Slovenia, Argentina, Hungary, Belarus, Turkey, UAE, Ireland, Tunisia, Finland, Spain and Canada.

Interactive segments

The High-Level Thematic Debate consisted of three interactive segments, the main goal of which was to discuss three aspects requiring attention in order to achieve full respect of human rights globally. The sessions allowed experts to discuss the main challenges that currently prevent human rights to be fully implemented and enjoyed by every human being. The sessions also discussed ways to overcome those challenges, including the role of Member States and civil society, and the importance of the full implementation of the international human rights legal framework. These sessions included: 1) Tackling discrimination and inequalities 2) Strengthening governance, the rule of law and access to justice, 3) Enabling active participation in society.

1) Interactive Segment 1: Tackling discrimination and inequalities

On July 12 the Interactive Segment 1, entitled “Tackling discrimination and inequalities” was held. Moderated by Kate Gilmore, Deputy High Commissioner, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, it featured presentations by:

- Opal Tometi, Co-founder, Black Lives Matter
- Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Under Secretary-General and Executive Director, UN Women
- Mutuma Ruteere, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance
- Diakhoumba Gassama, Realizing Sexual and Reproductive Justice (RESURJ) Senegal

Discussants included:

- Jose Maria Viera, Human Rights Policy Advisor and Coordinator, International Disabilities Association;
- Zamir Akram, Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on the Right to Development

Other speakers included representatives of Ireland, Kazakhstan, Liberia, Slovenia, Chad, the UK, Finland and a civil society representative for refugees and migrants in Australia.

During the session, participants discussed how protection against discrimination is a tenet of international human rights law; however, people are routinely discriminated against for a variety of reasons. For the 2030 Agenda to be realized, issues of inequalities, discrimination, poverty, exclusion and disenfranchisement must be adequately addressed. The suppression of democratic practices including the right to vote, assemble and freedom of expression were addressed as under threat. Access to justice was discussed time and time again as paramount.

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The intersectionality of discrimination was at the forefront of this discussion. Systematic racial discrimination was addressed by a Black Lives Matter representative with a key focus on restrictions of democratic freedoms. “When oppressed peoples are heard is when we all improve. When black people make gains, historically, so does society,” she said. Inclusivity regarding gender, race, sexual orientation and religion were recommendations made to truly make a transformational change in our world. People with disabilities face additional challenges that are routinely ignored.

Many panelists put forth recommendations for a more inclusive and transparent process of dealing with human rights abuses and calming the growing rise of xenophobia; supporting civil society organizations who provide services governments can't; providing access to education for girls and women; pushing for stronger political will to fight discrimination; and electing a new Secretary General who puts human rights at the top of their agenda. Furthermore, one panelist stated that “protection of women and girls is essential to address since it's a fundamental issue.” One civil society panelist from Senegal was adamant that the UN had not lived up to its goals regarding women's empowerment and equality in the past 70 years. She noted that early marriage and FGM were still prevalent in many societies and even though resolutions have been passed, “we need to make our resolutions real!” She called for member states to follow through on their commitments to the charter, and stressed the need for “a feminist secretary general to have the strength of their convictions to protect all men, women and children.”

2) Interactive segment 2: Strengthening governance, the role of law and access to justice

On July 12, an interactive segment was held entitled, "Strengthening governance, the role of law and access to justice".

Moderated by Ken Roth, Executive Director, Human Rights Watch, it featured presentations by:

- Irene Khan, Director General, International Development Law Organization
- Jacqueline Moudeina, lead lawyer for the victims of the Hissene Habre regime
- Silvia Fernandez de Gurmendi, President, International Criminal Court
- Harkristuti Harkrisnowo, Professor, University of Indonesia

Discussants included:

- Ivan Simonovic, Assistant Secretary General, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
- Ian McDougall, Executive Vice President & General Counsel, Lexis Nexis
- Haoliang Xu, Assistant Administrator and Director, Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, UNDP

Other speakers included the representatives of Senegal, Denmark, Guatemala, UAE and Rwanda.

During this session, panelists agreed on the existing interlinkage between human rights and the rule of law, and how rule of law - as defined by a speaker - is like a boat with human rights as its compass. Panelists also highlighted the need for the rule of law to overcome inequalities and discrimination, and defined justice as a basic human right. In this line, Rwanda's representative

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mentioned the slow justice process that took place in the country after the genocide, and recognized that despite justice can take a long time to achieve, it can be done.

Another speaker claimed the need of an interdependent global and consistent pattern of criminal justice for justice to be effective. Another aspect noted was the need to work on implementing the national and international laws and treaties created by states and international organizations, as well as the need to make institutions sharper to work towards that. An example was given of women's rights in Indonesia: despite many laws and institutions that aim at recognizing and protecting women's rights, women do not enjoy their human rights due to the lack of implementation of these. A panelist also claimed that not respecting human rights and the lack of rule of law is a starting point for conflict and instability. Finally, the importance of looking of justice from the perspective of the victim was highlighted. The example that was put was on how a single courageous woman, wishing to get justice and overcome the shame of being raped, talked directly to the perpetrator and changed the trial and the narrative, and it make clear that the rule of law and justice are ways to bring justice to victims.

3) Interactive Segment 3: Enabling active participation in society

On 12 July, an interactive segment was held entitled, "Enabling active participation in society".

Moderated by Laura Trevelyan, BBC Correspondent, it featured presentations by:

- Salil Shetty, Secretary-General of Amnesty International
- Alaa Murabit, founder of Voice of Libyan Women, SDG Advocate
- Christophe Deloire, Director-General, Reporters Without Borders
- Monika Bickert, Director of Public Policy, Facebook

Discussants included:

- Milan Antonijevic, Director, Lawyers Committee for Human Rights
- Maina Kiai, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association
- Alan Miller, Special Envoy, Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institution

During the last segment, speakers explored how intergovernmental bodies of the UN can create space for civil society participation as key actors to make progress in the 21st century global issues. Discussants claimed that no civil society can survive without ensuring human agency, and that an attack on civil society is, in the end, an attack on human agency. They also agreed on the current trading of security and human rights in an unprecedented way, and one panelist added that this trade is even more accentuated when it comes to women. A final note on that regard claimed by one panelist was that "women are not recognized by the work they do, not even by the UN".

At one point, the representative of the EU stated that if smart girls are educated, they become empowered women and that changes the power in society. This is scary for some people and leads to discriminatory against women and girls, such as the ones that prevent them from getting basic education.

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The role of the internet was also discussed by one panelist as a means to give people a voice they did not have before. The panelists highlighted the difficulties that CSOs have in accessing the UN, and highlighted that this must change as civil society is a key actor in diplomacy and activism. A final highlight made by another panelist was the importance of financing and making civil society sustainable, and thus ensuring that governments support it and see it as their allies.

Ministerial Plenary Debate

During this session, more than 90 Member States reaffirmed their commitments to protecting human rights and the value that this has on achieving the 2030 sustainable development goals. Member states noted the importance of human rights in maintaining international peace and security and the need to look at human rights violations as an early warning of crisis. Other themes touched on included the need to mainstream human rights across the UN agenda and its value in the face of global threats. It was noted that human rights was a fundamental pillar of stability and development and in this regard, they should be maintained and protected.

The importance of gender equality was highlighted, in particular by Brazil, who noted gender equality was essential to make progress across all SDGs. Sweden discussed its feminist foreign policy and its goal to enhance gender equality and address gender-based violence. France noted that it was fighting violence against women, forced marriage, child marriage, and for the reproductive and sexual rights of women. The member for Sri Lanka highlighted a concern echoed across the globe in the 21st century: that to speak of gender inequality prevailing in today's society was unacceptable. Senegal stated that, "Women are targeted and all forms of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) are committed against them in conflict." Guatemala mentioned that the plight of indigenous women needs to be addressed in order to eradicate all forms of GBV. The United Arab Emirates assured states that gender equality is one of their main priorities. It referenced a newly formed council for gender equality and women's political participation, which is 20% of the parliament and 30% of the Cabinet. Turkey recommitted to improving the rights of women and girls so it might fully participate in the private and public sphere. The speaker from Thailand also reflected on gender equality mechanisms implemented in 2015, including a committee and funds to compensate victims of gender discrimination, and further noted the Thai Government's mainstreaming of gender equality in its criminal justice policies. The Bahamas and the Czech Republic claimed that they will keep working to end VAW. Finally, the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) spoke of the promotion and advancement of women, including intentions to finalise a plan of action for the advancement of women, as well as reiterating women's empowerment was a key priority for OIC regions.

The Women, Peace and Security agenda was also mentioned by some states. Sweden discussed its priorities in implementing the agenda, and claimed that its focus remained on support for women as actors of peace and security such as increased political participation, participation in peace processes and women mediators as they support the Nordic Women's Mediators Network. The representative of France noted France's commitment to UNSCR 1325 and the development of NAP for the

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implementation of 1325. Germany claimed that conflict prevention and peace processes can only be successful if the international community is inclusive, and that means including women.

Moving forward

All in all, this debate highlighted some of the challenges that the fight for human rights is facing. Among these challenges, the lack of support (including financial) and inclusion of civil society at the UN level as well as the national level, the lack of political will to implement national and international laws and treaties, the discrimination and social inequalities suffered for gender, race, and ethnicity. Finally, the importance of human rights as a prevention measure of conflict was highlighted and the intrinsic link between rule of law and human rights confirmed.

Mr Lykketoft presented the closing remarks and shared two main takeaways. Firstly, he recognized that after 50 years of the signature of the International Covenants, this debate demonstrated that the fight for human rights - including civil, political, economic, social and environmental rights - is a constant, one and universal fight. He claimed that all Member States must meet their obligations and protect those values necessary to protect human rights. Secondly, he noted that “the UN and the next UN Secretary-General must continue to fight for human rights and for those who defend human rights”. He then called all the UN system to work on the cause. Unique opportunity to take action and to work on the existing connection between development, human rights, and peace and security.