



General Assembly

Distr.: General
9 April 2021

Original: English

Human Rights Council

Forty-seventh session

21 June–9 July 2021

Agenda items 2 and 3

Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Annual full-day discussion on the human rights of women

Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Summary

In accordance with resolution 6/30, the Human Rights Council convened its annual full-day discussion on the human rights of women. The discussion was divided into two panels: the first focused on the theme “Accountability for women and girls in humanitarian settings” and the second discussed the theme “COVID-19 and women’s rights”.



I. Introduction

1. On 13 and 14 July 2020, the Human Rights Council, pursuant to resolution 6/30, convened its annual full-day discussion on the human rights of women. The first panel discussion addressed the theme “accountability for women and girls in humanitarian settings”. The second panel was devoted to “COVID-19 and women’s rights”. The webcasts of the panel discussions are archived and can be viewed at <http://webtv.un.org>.

II. Accountability for women and girls in humanitarian settings

2. The first panel discussion was opened by the United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights and Crown Princess Mary of Denmark, and moderated by Tammam Aloudat, Deputy Executive Director of the access campaign at Médecins sans Frontières. The panellists were Tatiana Mukanire, Coordinator for the National Network of Survivors of Sexual Violence, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sara Hossain, advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh, and honorary Executive Director of the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, and Enid Muthoni Ndiga, senior Vice-President, global legal programme, Center for Reproductive Rights.

A. Opening statements

3. In her opening remarks, the Deputy High Commissioner noted that the Human Rights Council had addressed sexual and gender-based violence, maternal health and child, early and forced marriage in the context of humanitarian settings. She said that the panel discussion would provide an opportunity to identify commonalities between those areas, considering in particular the vulnerabilities of women and girls. She referred to the harmful impacts of conflicts and disasters on women and girls, especially those already suffering from multiple discrimination, with additional hardships generated by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The Deputy High Commissioner further elaborated on the obstacles to seeking services, justice and redress in such contexts, which included disintegrating judicial systems, corruption, discrimination against the displaced, fear of reprisals and the stigma often associated with gender-based violations. She noted that where accountability mechanisms still functioned, they tended to prosecute and punish crimes of sexual violence, without eradicating the continuum of human rights violations or their root causes. Adopting a broad vision for accountability would be essential for protecting and restoring the rights of women and girls. That would require laws, policies and processes adapted to their needs, as well as corrective action to address the consequences of violations.

4. In that regard, the Deputy High Commissioner mentioned human rights investigations, including bodies established by the Human Rights Council, as a critical step towards achieving individual accountability and ending systemic causes of human rights violations. She went on to describe the progress made by human rights investigations in integrating a gender perspective and focusing on violations of women and girls, for example in Myanmar, South Sudan and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. The Deputy High Commissioner then highlighted the importance of understanding the continuum of violations of the rights of women and girls in tackling accountability in humanitarian settings. Investigation and punishment of crimes should be accompanied by health-care services for survivors. While the State had the primary responsibility for supporting legal and other services, they required coordinated engagement with other actors, including regional and global bodies and civil society organizations. Those actors must uphold the dignity and rights of women and girls in humanitarian responses. The Deputy High Commissioner added that the guidance of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee on mainstreaming gender-based violence in humanitarian responses and on identifying and mitigating the risks of gender-based violence as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic illustrated the efforts undertaken by the United Nations.

5. Crown Princess Mary is a Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). In her video message, she recalled that human rights were the basic rights

and freedoms that belonged to every person from birth until death. She noted that human rights did not end when emergencies began, although emergencies increased the risk of violations of the rights of women and girls. As such, measures should be taken to protect those rights, to provide safe spaces and ensure access to reproductive health services. She then called for the involvement of women and girls in decision-making processes at all stages of policy design, implementation and monitoring. Crown Princess Mary concluded by urging all actors to integrate those issues into humanitarian programmes, particularly in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

B. Overview of presentations

6. The moderator, Mr. Aloudat, introduced the panel by explaining that emergencies disrupted the lives of communities and led humanitarian actors, such as Médecins sans Frontières, to focus on immediate life-saving interventions. However, such interventions had become insufficient in conflicts and emergencies where the breakdown of institutions, coupled with already poor livelihoods, health services and social inclusion, had contributed to disempower specific groups. He observed that by ignoring this negative impact or failing to consult with affected populations, humanitarian actors would further harm those groups, particularly women and girls who experienced sexual and gender-based violence. Mr. Aloudat stressed that although discussed and accepted by all, accountability for women and girls was not universally implemented in humanitarian action and often accountability to donors for the delivery of outputs was prioritized over accountability to affected populations. Involving affected populations in the planning, implementation and evaluation of humanitarian programmes during and after emergencies would help address this gap. He then argued that the protection of women and girls in humanitarian situations concerned all humanitarian workers, including doctors and nurses, logisticians and administrators, who provided “physical” services. Finally, he stressed that protecting women and girls implied a shift of responsibility and decision-making from aid workers to the local level, where they were in direct contact with the people they served.

7. Ms. Mukanire spoke on behalf of victims and survivors of sexual violence in conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She said that being a victim of rape meant death in one’s own flesh, one’s soul, with a broken and irreparable heart. She then argued that sexual violence destroyed the entire human being, their physical, mental and economic situation. She further emphasized that sexual violence had serious, long-lasting and transgenerational consequences for victims and survivors. Ms. Mukanire referred to reparations as a way of acknowledging the harm done to survivors, while helping them to recover and alleviate their pain. She said that the State had the primary responsibility for protecting its population and providing each survivor with a guarantee of non-repetition, while highlighting the need for decisions and interventions tailored to the needs of victims and survivors. Ms. Mukanire concluded with some recommendations: consultation and direct involvement of survivors in the design and implementation of all policies related to sexual violence during and after conflict was critical and could include the presence of survivors and experts in peacekeeping missions and collaboration with local networks of survivors. Holistic care and support for victims and survivors for reintegration into their communities was also key. Finally, she recommended support for the Global Survivors Fund launched by the joint Nobel peace prize laureates Denis Mukwege and Nadia Murad.

8. Ms. Hossain reminded the audience that the panel discussion was taking place at a particular time, during the COVID-19 pandemic. She discussed the importance of modern technology for helping to advance accountability, as this had transformed lives and facilitated access to basic services and justice. She pointed out that women and girls were still deprived of access to digital devices and Internet networks because of restrictive State policies or family controls. That in turn had deprived them of access to information, advice and assistance or of securing services or remedies. However, where accessible, technology, combined with knowledge, had allowed women to seek services, to document their experiences and to communicate their needs. Ms. Hossain went on to conclude that access to technology was linked to the realization of rights that were essential for accountability for women and girls in humanitarian settings.

9. Reflecting on the role of accountability mechanisms, Ms. Hossain underlined good practices in documenting intersecting human rights violations experienced by women and girls. She referred to the work of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar on mobilizing support to enhance protection for women and girls on the ground. She recommended that the Human Rights Council build on that experience to work with other investigative bodies. The Council should require analysis of the gendered impact of all human rights violations, including sexual and reproductive health and rights. Ms. Hossain further suggested that thematic experts and specialized support staff, such as interpreters with experience of women's rights and mental health, be included in such bodies, in order to support women and girls participating in investigations. As the prospects for accountability through international justice were distant, particularly in humanitarian contexts, she suggested that emphasis be placed on the empowerment of women. That entailed giving them a safe space to voice their concerns with access to counselling services and mental health support. She further pointed out ways in which such empowerment could be achieved: (a) access to education, training and employment, which would increase life choices and mitigate the risks of violence; (b) partnerships with local women's organizations for mutual support and enforcement of legal rights; (c) availability of justice services within the family and community, including online and offline and through hotlines, virtual courts, community radio and social media; and finally (d) access to social security and safe housing, and protection against reprisals. She concluded that nationality, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or other status, such as disability, should not be factors of discrimination in the enjoyment of human rights by women and girls in humanitarian settings.

10. Ms. Muthoni Ndiga welcomed the work of the Human Rights Council on the issue of accountability for women and girls in humanitarian settings. She mentioned a global consensus on the need to bridge the humanitarian and development nexus, while emphasizing the centrality of human rights in ensuring accountability. Reflecting on the reasons for addressing the issue of accountability in humanitarian settings, she noted that times of emergency exacerbated and entrenched patterns of discrimination against women; their human rights were often neglected and deprioritized, which increased the risk of violations. Ms. Muthoni Ndiga illustrated her point by citing the difficulties women encountered in accessing certain services owing to the collapse of health infrastructures, unsafe and restrictive environments, a lack of information and fear of stigma when seeking sexual and reproductive health care. She also mentioned weakness of the rule of law and fear of reprisals as impediments to seeking justice and legal remedies.

11. Ms. Muthoni Ndiga underscored the need for broader gender-based approaches in transitional justice mechanisms. That meant making reproductive violence, such as forced pregnancies and forced abortions, visible, because tackling these was critical to lasting peace efforts. She referred to the work of her organization in Colombia in that regard. Commenting on the work of human rights mechanisms, she noted that effective accountability mechanisms would imply the full, equal, effective and meaningful participation of women and girls, beyond only criminal accountability. That would include access to remedies without discrimination for victims and survivors. She urged the Human Rights Council to build on the work of the Security Council on the women and peace and security agenda, and to integrate the right to access sexual and reproductive health services as a form of rehabilitation. Ms. Muthoni Ndiga recommended that the Human Rights Council continue and scale up its work on the topic, including by adopting a resolution. She also called for the prioritization of sexual and reproductive health information and services in donor aid policies and programmes, and for flexible and predictable funding for women-led organizations working at the forefront of the response.

C. Statements by representatives of States and observers

12. During the interactive dialogue, speakers described the gender inequalities that had exposed women and girls to further human rights violations during humanitarian crises. Combined with underreported violations, that had complicated life-saving services and limited access to remedies. Several speakers expressed regret that such violence persisted 75 years after the founding of the United Nations, 25 years after the Beijing Declaration and 20

years after the adoption of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women and peace and security. Others pointed to issues such as a lack of data, poor understanding of the scope of sexual and gender-based violence and a lack of adequate responses as major obstacles to achieving gender equality and women's agency in such contexts. Speakers agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic had aggravated the impact of violence. They also noted that individuals already suffering from other ongoing humanitarian crises had suffered disproportionately from the negative impact of the pandemic, as illustrated by the increase in child, early and forced marriages.

13. Several speakers recalled that women and girls could barely seek and access justice for multiple reasons. These included disintegrated support systems, collapsed institutions and the stigma associated with sexual violence. Speakers agreed that holding perpetrators accountable required both immediate and long-term gender-sensitive solutions. Others mentioned that the twentieth anniversary of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) was an occasion to reflect on the obligation of States to realize the human rights of women in emergencies. While stressing the primary role of States in providing legal and other services to victims of human rights violations, speakers noted that national actors, including civil society, human rights defenders, justice actors and health workers, had a critical role, hence the need to better coordinate interventions between them.

14. Regarding the normative framework on accountability to women and girls in humanitarian settings, speakers mentioned the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the women and peace and security agenda of the Security Council. They noted that Security Council resolution 2467 (2019) helped to promote a survivor-centred approach and enhance accountability for conflict-related sexual violence. In the resolution, the Council emphasized that advancing gender equality and women's political, social and economic empowerment was critical to the prevention of and response to sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations. It stressed that the safety and empowerment of women and girls was important for enabling their meaningful participation in peace processes, conflict prevention and reconstruction, and that therefore women's protection and participation were inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing.

15. During the discussions, speakers further recalled that accountability in humanitarian contexts rested with all stakeholders, not just experts on gender issues. Speakers considered it essential that survivors of conflict-related sexual violence had effective access to justice and that perpetrators were held accountable, including through long-term interventions, which were critical to meeting the needs of survivors. A number of speakers agreed that reparations and remedies must be transformative and aspire to changing rather than reinforcing pre-existing patterns of discrimination and structural and intersectional inequalities that were the cause of violence against women and girls. Other speakers called for the promotion of holistic and survivor-centred approaches to address sexual and gender-based violence, and for ensuring gender-transformative formal and informal accountability processes.

16. Rights-based accountability for women and girls in humanitarian settings involves multiple, participatory and transparent forms of monitoring, review and oversight. It places women and girls at the centre of all interventions and provides them with effective access to remedies for human rights violations. Reflecting on this, several stakeholders suggested thinking beyond legal proceedings to consider participatory processes, whereby citizens and survivors held service providers and institutions accountable. Speakers also discussed how placing the experiences, perspectives and leadership of women at the heart of humanitarian action was critical for addressing their specific needs in the development of policies and programmes. Investing in the empowerment of women was essential to achieving those ends, including by providing them with adequate knowledge and resources to strengthen their capacities and enable them to become agents of change and leaders. Speakers finally highlighted the crucial role of women's organizations in responding to and representing different perspectives while addressing violations of the human rights of women and girls. They concluded that efforts should be aimed at strengthening women's capacity and increasing their role in national disaster planning and response programmes, including in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

17. Some speakers suggested that a full range of sexual and reproductive health information and services, tailored to the needs of beneficiaries, were essential in achieving gender equality and the economic, social and political empowerment of women. Others agreed that sexual and reproductive health services were also key for rehabilitation and reparations for victims and survivors. Some speakers regretted that data on adolescent girls was often lacking in humanitarian contexts, despite their age-specific needs. They mentioned the measures that could help fill that gap, namely the development of new tools or the adaptation of existing tools, according to need, and the coordination of work between humanitarian actors. Speakers recommended the participation of girls in actions affecting their lives, including in humanitarian needs assessments, response plans and policies. They also suggested that funding be prioritized for addressing the distinct violations faced by girls, namely gender-based violence, and for education, as well as for child protection measures.

18. Speakers mentioned funding as a requisite for accountability for women and girls in humanitarian settings, such as solidarity funds for women. Reference was made to the fund of the International Organisation of la Francophonie, “La Francophonie avec elles”, created in July 2020 to mobilize human and financial resources in support of women and their families affected by the socioeconomic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

D. Responses of panellists and concluding remarks

19. The moderator emphasized that even when services were available, women often faced structural and practical barriers, despite the prevalence of different manifestations of gender-based violence. He further argued that the COVID-19 pandemic had affected individuals and groups already living in dire conditions, thus forcing all stakeholders to provide adequate emergency preparedness in terms of the increased representation of women in response plans and their access to information, services and reparations.

20. Responding to questions on challenges to the implementation of projects on the ground, Ms. Mukanire described how insecurity had contributed to restricting access to services, such as health care, for survivors and victims. She also stressed the need to involve survivors in all phases of humanitarian programmes, from design to delivery and evaluation, to meet their needs. Projects should be implemented not just for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, but also for all kinds of victims and stakeholders.

21. Elaborating on the issue of interventions centred on survivors, Ms. Hossain recalled that women and girls must be empowered, including through strengthened collaboration with frontline services, local actors, civil society and government agencies. In that regard, cooperation with health workers, justice actors and paralegals had emerged as a promising practice to combat gender-based violence in humanitarian contexts. She reaffirmed the need to have women represented in all programmes and decision-making processes related to sexual violence. She also explained how all stakeholders responded to this serious crime according to their mandates, hence the need for all humanitarian actors to remain engaged in this issue, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, she recommended that a nuanced approach be adopted and leadership and agency built for adolescent girls, including recognition of their right to sexual and reproductive health, and that existing laws be implemented in coordination with civil society and State bodies. She also recommended that legal aid and access to formal and informal justice systems be guaranteed within the human rights framework.

22. In response to comments from the audience, Ms. Muthoni Ndiga made three points. On enhancing women’s participation, she said it was important to provide forums and opportunities for women and girls not just to be beneficiaries but to participate in identifying the problems they faced and in contextualizing the violations. Structures could be formed to give women agency and the opportunity to do what they were not able to do before: for instance in northern Uganda structures for the delivery of health care allowed women to rate delivery of the service and say how it could be improved. Regarding the issue of enhancing accountability, she explained that those involved in the humanitarian response should look at the opportunities for transformation, for example by combining life-saving services with the development of accountability measures, while changing laws and putting in place new

structures and services in areas such as education, contraception and information. Finally, she said that accountability took a long time and should therefore be coupled with the day-to-day delivery of services.

23. In his concluding remarks, the moderator restated the need for further discussions on linking human rights and humanitarian issues when discussing accountability for violations of the rights of women and girls.

III. COVID-19 and women's rights

A. Opening statements

24. The Director of the Thematic Engagement, Special Procedures and Right to Development Division, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), opened the second panel discussion. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation of Spain, Arancha González Laya delivered the keynote speech. The panel comprised Editar Adhiambo Ochieng, founder of the Feminist for Peace Rights and Justice Centre and feminist activist from the Kibera informal settlement, Nairobi; Natalia Kanem, Executive Director of UNFPA; Jayati Ghosh, Professor of Economics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; and Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka and Ása Regnér, Executive Director and Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. Ms. Ghosh and Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka could participate only in the first round of intervention and Ms. Regnér replaced Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka for the second round of intervention.

25. In her opening remarks, the Director of the Thematic Engagement, Special Procedures and Right to Development Division of OHCHR stated that the COVID-19 pandemic had affected societies unevenly, with women and girls being put at higher risk due to pre-existing inequalities. Specifically, the pandemic had been accompanied by a significant surge in gender-based violence, risks of reduced and less accessible sexual and reproductive health services and, owing to school closures, a higher risk for girls of child marriages, unintended pregnancies and gender-based violence. The economic crisis had had a disproportionate impact on women and girls owing to limited access to resources, precarious forms of employment and their concentration in the informal sector. Moreover, women had been underrepresented in the majority of COVID-19 national response leadership teams, excluding them further from decision-making. The most severe impacts of the pandemic were felt by those facing intersecting forms of discrimination, such as women and girls living in poverty, or those with an irregular immigration status.

26. The Director pointed out that for an unprecedented crisis, unprecedented responses were needed and gender equality would be a fundamental factor. She mentioned existing strategies to build back better while advancing gender equality, namely the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Their implementation needed to be accelerated in a comprehensive manner. Furthermore, she underlined that the COVID-19 pandemic had also brought about opportunities that should be seized to transform societies. She mentioned, for example, the efforts of certain States in prioritizing responses to gender-based violence and expanding access to sexual and reproductive health services and goods. The need to value and redistribute unpaid care work was made evident. Furthermore, more effective responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in many places where women were in charge had demonstrated the power of women's leadership.

27. The Director reiterated that the crisis would only be overcome through solidarity, coordination and multilateralism, and with the equal participation of women and girls. More support was needed for the work of feminist movements, grass-roots women's organizations and women human rights defenders, who were at the forefront of monitoring the impact of the pandemic on women and girls and of providing essential services. Equally, decisive action should be taken to prevent and respond to gender-based violence. In that respect, she mentioned that 146 Member States had already expressed support for the Secretary-General's call for peace in the home. Moreover, the Secretary-General had stressed the critical

importance of tackling gender inequality, including in his recently launched call to action on human rights and in his policy briefs and guidance on the COVID-19 pandemic, which reaffirmed the commitment of the United Nations to promoting the realization of women's human rights during the pandemic and throughout the recovery phase. In her concluding remarks, the Director reported that OHCHR had produced guidance on how to protect women's rights during the crisis and stated that it had been supporting and would continue to support Member States, civil society organizations and human rights defenders in their responses to the pandemic.

28. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation of Spain began by underlining the importance of multilateralism as the best option to achieve shared objectives and the only option to protect against common threats, which was particularly true in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Women and girls had been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Women represented 70 per cent of front-line health workers, carried out most of the care work and were concentrated in the informal labour market. She also pointed at the high numbers of gender-based cases of violence during the pandemic and the fact that women and girls were among the first to be impacted by difficulties in delivering basic services, such as health and education.

29. The Minister noted that Spain had been working on a coordinated and efficient response, guaranteeing a sustainable and transformative recovery with human rights at the centre. Firstly, women should participate effectively in all planning and decision-making regarding the response to the pandemic and women's organizations and women human rights defenders should be supported to guarantee access to basic services for women and girls. Furthermore, she stated that gender-based violence had to be firmly and unequivocally combated by declaring protection services as essential services, by collecting disaggregated and transparent data and by strengthening prevention services, helplines and access to reliable information. In addition, response and recovery should focus specifically on the impact on women, taking into account recognition for unpaid care work, reduction in the gender pay gap and real economic empowerment. Finally, more and better data were necessary to put effective policies in practice.

30. The Minister emphasized that Spain was promoting concrete initiatives within the United Nations, regional organizations and as part of the Generation Equality Forum. She reaffirmed her belief in international cooperation and collaboration with mechanisms such as the Human Rights Council, its special procedures and the human rights treaty bodies, which allowed for learning of the different approaches and successful policies of countries, including to "build back better".

B. Overview of presentations

31. Ms. Ochieng began by stressing that the impact of the pandemic on women and girls in informal settlements had been severe, considering especially the rising cases of sexual and gender-based violence, including domestic violence. In Kibera, the biggest informal settlement in Nairobi, the Feminist for Peace Rights and Justice Centre had been working hard to provide a safe space for women to speak out and to support them in reporting to the authorities. The organization had also been working to support women and girls in receiving adequate health care, psychosocial care and a decent education. She highlighted the rise in unwanted and "forced" teenage pregnancies, resulting from rape and sexual violence, which would lead to more girls dropping out of school or seeking unsafe abortions, owing to the taboo surrounding the topic and the lack of awareness of their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Likewise, she pointed out that women were breadwinners in their communities and that job losses and financial constraints, combined with physical confinement, had significantly increased the risk of domestic violence against them. Ms. Ochieng concluded her address by highlighting the efforts of her organization to create safe spaces for women and girls who were survivors of gender-based violence to speak about their experiences, helping them to report violence to the authorities, connecting survivors of violence with health and psychosocial support, providing services and raising awareness of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sexual and gender-based violence and on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

32. Ms. Kanem stated that women's sexual and reproductive health and rights, along with the alarming rise in gender-based violence, including femicide, needed to be urgently and vigorously supported during the pandemic. She urged all States to join the Secretary-General's call for peace in the home. She highlighted the manifold problems related to pregnancy during the pandemic, such as suspended public transport that deprived women of the means of accessing obstetric care in a timely manner. She shared an example of a young indigenous woman who had had to be carried to a remote health clinic by a hammock held by community members after two days of life-threatening labour. She also pointed out that pregnant women may have delayed or foregone prenatal care, owing to the fear of contracting COVID-19, loss of income and the absence of regular maternal health services, including the redeployment of midwives to combat COVID-19. She stated that UNFPA had been providing personal protective equipment to women health workers, such as midwives, who were often left to work without such equipment. They were also providing family planning services and dignity kits with soap and menstruation supplies, including for women and girls in refugee and internal displacement camps. Ms. Kanem reiterated that sexual and reproductive health services and interventions were essential and that sexual and reproductive health and rights should be integral to any COVID-19 response plans and to achieving the objectives of the 2030 Agenda. UNFPA had been researching the unique vulnerabilities of older women, indigenous women and girls and those of African descent. She emphasized that good quality population data was key in making people in situations of vulnerability and multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination visible, and that disaggregated data allowed Governments to plan and prioritize service provision. She concluded by mentioning the work of UNFPA in mapping populations in situations of vulnerability and those most at risk of COVID-19 and emphasizing the value of the UNFPA world population dashboard, accessible to all.

33. Ms. Ghosh highlighted the effects of the pandemic on women as workers, both as paid workers, whether in formal or informal work or self-employed, and as unpaid workers within homes and communities. The crisis had reinforced relational inequalities and power structures and affected women's livelihoods even more severely than those of men. Owing to pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities, they had been more likely to lose their jobs and face reductions in income or had had to leave the labour force because of child care and other domestic responsibilities. She explained that a key reason for the disproportionate impact was the fact that women were more likely to be informal workers without legal or social protection. While more than two thirds of all health workers in 104 countries were women, they earned 28 per cent less than men owing to, among other factors, their concentration in lower-paid occupations such as nurses and midwives. They were also more likely to be exposed to infection. Ms. Ghosh highlighted the obstacles that migrant care workers, who were overwhelmingly women, faced and the disproportionate impact of the emerging food crisis on women and girls. She stated that those complex and existential challenges required bold visionary leadership and an internationalist spirit, a global new deal. A global new deal required economic recovery, based on significantly increased public expenditure, regulation and redistribution as the main elements. It should be oriented towards addressing climate change and protecting the environment; should include an emphasis on the care economy; and should contain a key focus on addressing and reducing inequalities. Ms. Ghosh concluded that, although challenging, this was not an impossible agenda. A global political will to confront seemingly impossible challenges had existed in the past, now would be the moment to find similar or even greater levels of ambition for humanity.

34. In her introduction, Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka reiterated that women continued to face barriers to political leadership worldwide. Moreover, she stated that for every three men quoted in the media on the subject of COVID-19, only one woman was quoted. At the same time, women leaders had been lauded for their responses to the pandemic, flattening the curve and setting new standards of leadership with transparency, public engagement and science-based decision-making. They acknowledged fears and took difficult decisions, and were now role models for crisis response, inspiring generations of women to come. She stressed that, given the deepening gender inequality arising from the pandemic, women's leadership in the response to COVID-19 was particularly important. She pointed at the main impacts of the pandemic: rising gender-based violence; compromised access to justice; reduction in access to sexual and reproductive health services; obstacles to access to information; a rising unpaid

care burden; and greater risk of child marriage, female genital mutilation, unintended pregnancies and HIV infections owing to girls being out of school. Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka reiterated that Governments had a responsibility to put women front and centre in responding to the pandemic, by ensuring gender balance; gender mainstreaming response and recovery plans and budgets; including gender experts and women's organizations in response planning, implementation and monitoring; and using data disaggregated by gender and evaluating the gender response. She concluded that women's involvement was crucial at all stages of legislative, policy and budgetary decision-making processes, which could require temporary special measures.

C. Statements by representatives of States and observers

35. During the dialogue, speakers reiterated the manifold negative impacts of the pandemic on women and girls, such as increased rates of sexual and gender-based violence, restricted access to sexual and reproductive health care and rights, school dropouts and additional layers of vulnerability for already marginalized women, such as poor women or lesbian, bisexual and transgender women. The COVID-19 pandemic had exacerbated existing gender inequalities, with women and girls bearing the brunt of unpaid care and informal work and with less access to social protection. Speakers stressed that weakened access to sexual and reproductive health care was resulting in increased rates of maternal mortality and morbidity, adolescent pregnancies, HIV infections and sexually transmitted diseases. In particular, several speakers stressed that abortion should be recognized as essential health care and remain available during pandemics, and that the crisis should not serve as a pretext to consciously curb access to essential services. In that context, speakers asked what could be done to ensure better access to and information about sexual and reproductive health and rights, to safeguard women's socioeconomic rights and to encourage Member States to share evidence on effective measures to prevent and reduce gender-based violence.

36. Speakers acknowledged that the ongoing pandemic and crisis response showed the necessity and urgency of protecting and promoting the human rights of women and girls. Furthermore, while examining the gendered and intersectional consequences of the pandemic was important, it was not enough; for genuine and lasting change, critically unveiling and redressing the structural causes of inequalities should be a priority. Speakers mentioned that the failure to address the pandemic, as with other crises, was also tied to deep-rooted structural drivers of inequality and systems of exclusion. They stated that the crisis should be seized as an occasion to address the long-standing and systemic gender inequalities that existed. Certain speakers reiterated that a radical change in approach and actions was needed to ensure women's human rights from a feminist and intersectional perspective. Other speakers emphasized that problems had been clearly identified, more data had been collected and the use of new technologies had proven key to promoting advances. They therefore asked the panel for additional suggestions as to how women could benefit most from the current momentum and on key actions to strengthen efforts to eradicate entrenched discriminatory attitudes and gender stereotypes and practices, to achieve gender equality and a sustainable future for all.

37. Speakers agreed that the response to the pandemic and its aftermath should be inclusive and gender-responsive, and stressed that gender inequality must be addressed. They explained that gender equality and women's equal participation in decision-making was not only an important goal in itself but that it additionally served as the key prerequisite for constructing a just and equitable society and achieving internationally agreed goals for development and sustainability. Ensuring women's participation in the labour market and recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work would lead to effective economic recovery from the pandemic and provide for more equitable and sustainable growth. Speakers also called for widespread support for the Secretary-General's call to action on human rights, for peace in the home and for solidarity and joint action throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Women's participation in the labour market, new services for families and promotion of female leadership roles must be the priorities for recovery plans, to be built with the full involvement and equal voices of women in decision-making. Continuing to collect data

disaggregated by age and sex was important for facilitating analysis and research and would contribute to a better understanding, monitoring and assessment of the effectiveness of policy interventions. Speakers emphasized that all analysis and the measures and actions taken should be inclusive and gender- and age-responsive and mitigate the risks of sexual and gender-based violence. They enquired about effective ways of mobilizing new actors and how States could incorporate gender perspectives in response to the pandemic more effectively.

D. Responses of panellists and concluding remarks

38. In her concluding remarks, Ms. Ochieng emphasized that women were exposed to violence because they had been forgotten by the system and policies were not enforced. In the Kibera settlement, looking at the right to abortion in the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol), the rights to non-discrimination and protection from violence enshrined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and Sustainable Development Goal 1 on poverty, it was clear that human rights obligations were not being implemented. She encouraged the international community to act in solidarity and work together to ensure that no woman was left behind and that all could access their rights equally, by implementing existing policies and by developing new policies to protect women. She concluded by stressing that violence should not be women's everyday reality nor should they be subjected to poverty, regardless of their age, colour, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability.

39. Ms. Kanem stated that rights obligations continued to be relevant to women in all circumstances and insisted on respect for the full human rights of women caught up in humanitarian situations, including those related to access to sexual and reproductive health information and services. She stressed that accountability should go beyond legal protection to promote the active participation of women and girls in humanitarian preparedness and response and in monitoring the delivery of life-saving services. There should be zero gender-based violence, zero harmful practices, zero unmet needs for family planning and sexual and reproductive health and rights services and zero deaths during childbirth. She reiterated that the United Nations and Member States could help to mitigate negative socioeconomic impacts, meet needs and build resilience. New actors should be brought in, such as the private sector, to break the silence and reverse stigma on a number of issues that impeded women from participating in the process of economic recovery. She emphasized that better comprehensive services, including shelter and counselling, and sensitization of the police and the judicial system regarding gender-based violence were required. She urged Member States to join the Secretary-General's pledge for peace in the home and to take a collaborative approach with a strong gender imperative to build back better.

40. Ms. Regnér reiterated that the COVID-19 pandemic had deepened pre-existing inequalities, exposing weaknesses in social, economic and political systems which were amplifying the negative impacts of the crisis for women and girls. Women and girls found themselves in a contradiction: on the one hand, they worked in essential jobs, literally saving the lives of the rest of the population, on the other hand these jobs were underpaid and undervalued. She stressed that the full participation of women and girls in public life and decision-making needed to be prioritized, as evidence showed that policies that excluded women from decision-making were simply less effective and even harmful to individuals and societies. Women were needed in decision-making because they actually changed agendas and strengthened social rights and inclusion. She concluded by reiterating that, while the pandemic was a tragedy, it had also brought opportunities that should be seized to anchor women's rights and empowerment, to change the narrative and logic that had been harmful to women and girls for so long, and to use the crisis to create a better world.