

7th World Summit of United Cities and Local Governments Congress

Towards Caring Territories against Gender-based Violence

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*Opening Remarks by Reem Alsalem,
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I would like to thank the organizers at United Cities and Local Governments Congress for centrally placing feminism on the agenda of the World Summit and for specifically spotlighting the issue of gender-based violence (GBV). I am also very honored to be with you.

Prior to assuming my role as UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, it was already evident that local and regional authorities are actively engaged in gender equality and participation, as well as crucial in addressing equitable access to services by women in all their diversities. In this respect, they are really the unsung heroes, who deserve more credit and visibility for their incredibly important work.

International human rights treaties and principles confer States a duty to protect and promote human rights, which also includes the duty to prevent discrimination and violence against women in both the public and private spheres. We often forget that local and regional governments are also central parts of the Government, and that they are really the operations rooms of governance where commitments and policies get translated into action. To my mind, they are kitchens where innovative and fearless approaches are often tried and tested, and where stakeholders have a pulse on what works and what does not. It is really at this level, where the imperative to adopt an all-of-society approach takes its full meaning and its full potential.

Allow me to take a moment to share the key elements that I would like us to reflect on during our session today and to keep in mind throughout the Summit.

There has been a good level of understanding and recognition that societies cannot prosper without achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment. What is perhaps less understood and appreciated is that the target of ending violence against women and girls is an integral part of that Goal, which needs targeted, deliberate considerations and policies. Granted, the above target is linked to the other targets under Goal 5, such as ending harmful practices, access to sexual and reproductive rights, participation and access to decision making spaces – to name a few –, without which the target will not be achievable.

Yet the target on violence against women also requires concrete policies, resources and stronger political commitment for the prevention of violence, including for femicide or gender-related killings, which can be facilitated by addressing the structural causes, as well as the risks and protective factors that are associated with violence. Achieving the target also requires a provision of a full range of protection services to victims or potential victims, such as shelters, long-term housing, and protection orders. These measures need to be readily available and easily accessible to women and girls.

Several cities represented here today have put in place some important measures. Cities that are most successful in this area work across a wide range of ministries and stakeholders, including judges, social workers, law enforcement, media, and ministries of education, to address the complex web of underlying causes of violence. They also work very deliberately with and through women organizations, in recognition of the contributions, expertise, and insights that women and feminist organizations and civil society groups provide. Such recognition and involvement are crucial in developing policies, that in the end, are designed for those concerned. This also aligns with the spirit that nothing happens for women without women.

Achieving gender equality and women's empowerment requires addressing a multitude of challenges for interventions to be truly transformative, and I would like to highlight eight priorities:

- 1. Committing a clear political will to ending violence against women and girls.** As the saying goes, where there is a will, there is a way. You can have as many elaborate laws as you want on ending violence, but without political will, they will not be implemented.
- 2. The importance of preserving the centrality of human rights standards and frameworks in fighting against violence against women and gender-based violence overall, and the importance of States taking up their duty to meet international obligations.**
- 3. The need for better quality and up-to-date disaggregated data on violence against women and girls that are not only disaggregated by sex and gender but also detail the relationship and dynamics between the victim and the perpetrator.**

This should also cover the acts of violence or gender-related killings.

Here, I wish to stress that myself and other mandate holders before me have called for the establishment of femicide observatories, which will foster better data collection and allow local governments come together with academia, civil society and others. I wish to mention the observatory of Seine-Saint-Denis in France as a particularly successful example of observatory on violence against women.

- 4. Allocating sufficient resources and ensuring gender-responsive budgeting throughout.** Gender responsive and transformative budgeting is one of the ways in which States translate and actualize their human rights obligations, including towards women and girls. The Beijing Declaration includes a commitment by signatories to allocate sufficient resources to achieve gender equality.

In some countries, the responsibility to identify resources is left completely to local authorities without support at the central level. In others, it is the other way around, whereby accountability on securing resources remain at the central level. Both approaches have their own shortcomings. A true prioritization of the prevention and response to GBV requires all levels of government to come together and join forces.

It is concerning that COVID-19 and multiple economic crises, as well as the subsequent austerity measures negatively impacted programs relating to women and children, including ending violence, which are sometimes the first to get slashed, reprogrammed or reassigned.

And of course, this is also related to the first point, as some local governments cannot justify increased resource allocation, since they do not have the data on the problem, and vice versa.

5. Adopting a truly intersectional approach to preventing and responding to violence.

Too many women and girls continue to face serious barriers to preventive measures, because we do not sufficiently consider the long-standing structural and discriminatory causes that contribute to the reduced access.

Such approach is particularly important for migrant women, women of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, women with disabilities, older women, indigenous women and women belonging to racial and religious minorities.

Sometimes, the bottlenecks can be relatively straightforward and as tangible as the lack of investment in providing linguistic and physical access to information. So not all obstacles are complex and some are low-hanging fruits that can be easily remedied. However, these obstacles can be the one deterrent that thwart the capacity of the survivors and victims to make an informed decision, to access support and to basically stay alive.

6. Strengthening attention to GBV in emergency response and contingency planning.

I have recently presented my first report to the 77th Session of the UN General Assembly on the intersection between climate change and violence against women. The gist of the report is that governments have not yet sufficiently factored in what it means to ensure that the incidents of violence against women and girls, which will be exacerbated by the climate crisis, are addressed.

7. Strengthening evidence-based monitoring and evaluation mechanisms of interventions to evaluate the effectiveness of existing legal and administrative frameworks, to ensure meaningful gender-related budgeting, and to deepen the understanding of how different actors, particularly line ministries, coordinate and work together, as well as how we can accurately measure impact, and so on and so forth.

8. Investing in training and building the capacity of public officials on the issue of violence against women and enable authorities attend to victims in a victim-centered manner. It cannot become a box ticking exercise, particularly because some of the most difficult elements to change, namely gender stereotypes, are often deeply engrained and rendered invisible that they are particularly difficult to tackle, yet they have a significant influence on the quality of the reception and of the service provided.

A lot can be still said but I will stop here, but happy to continue the discussion on this further.

Thank you for your attention.