

Commemoration of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women

United Nations Headquarters – ECOSOC Chamber

25 November 2022

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The commemoration that brings us together here today speaks to me both as a woman and as Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences. I have always said that I will know that violence against women is being adequately addressed when there will be no more need for my mandate in the future. Sadly, that will not be happening any time soon, as we continue to see epidemic levels of violence.

Some have called the phenomena of violence against women a shadow pandemic. This pandemic is only in the “shadow” however because we have put it there. Its place belongs in the light, because it is in broad day light where violence against women and girls happens day in and day out for millions of them around the world.

Being a woman has not become any easier. On the contrary. Women continue to experience or be subjected to violence, often because they are women, but also because of the many other overlapping parts of their identities, including what they do, how they think, what they say, what they believe, who they love, what they feel, and what they reject and resist.

Violence against women is so pervasive and widespread that every woman I know has a built-in compass to try to assess and recognize the risks, and navigate violent spaces that she inhabits on a daily basis with the least amount of harm – still often failing at reducing the harm or staying alive.

To complicate matters, the climate crisis, the current global food crisis, and the COVID-19 crisis have just exacerbated women’s daily realities of violence as they have affected women and girls differently and disproportionately. Being a woman or girl complicated because of the global push back against women’s rights and gender equality.

Which brings me to another point: The pushback is real. As women continue to resist this pushback, the forces of regression are becoming smarter, better organized and more brutal. One of its concerning mutations of this pushback is its relentless attack on women’s bodily autonomy as women, their access to sexual and reproductive health rights, under the pretext that these do not conform with the social, cultural, religious, or political systems in which we live.

The aim is clear: to prevent women in all their diversity from rising to their full potential, from owning their right to participate, from contributing to society and to make an example out of women or girls that dared to be too ambitious, vocal, assertive, opinionated, organized, and proud of their identity and other attributes. Women also get punished for being members of the communities they belong to – particularly in times of war and conflict, with the objective of beating women their communities into submission, destroying or breaking them.

Another more recent manifestation of this pushback is the is the attempts in some corners to erase the word “woman” from our lingo and discourse, from society and from public spaces and to question their sex and gender-based rights. More worrisome is the fact that the international and regional normative legal frameworks governing women and children’s rights, like CEDAW and the CRC are coming under attack. The task of defending these frameworks should be assumed fully by States. It should not be left to civil society organizations, women human rights defenders and others to counter false narratives and misinformation about these important frameworks.

And while we have collectively made important strides in stepping prevention, protection and assistance efforts as well as increase meaningful participation of women in many countries, we still have to do better to walk the talk. This means providing more effective support and protection to women human rights defenders everywhere continues to lack behind.

To be clear – women are not waiting to be given spaces or a seat at a table. They are rising, roaring, claiming what it is rightfully theirs. They are leading in the thinking and action and the search for solutions. They know no society will thrive if they are left behind.

Most of these defenders we will not know their names, we won't see them on TV screens. They are quietly and diligently working away to protect their rights, saving lives and securing freedoms. We owe it to them and to all of us to empower them, protect and support them, but above all to make sure they stay alive.

So as I close let me ask you this: what will it take for us to finally be able to say that we on a day like the 25th of November, we do not need to raise awareness about the scale of the problem because we are all sufficiently aware and committed. And that instead, we are coming together to celebrate how we are pushing forward?

What will it take for us to be able to say, actually, violence against women and girls is sufficiently high on everyone's agenda, we do not need any more a Special Rapporteur for it?

Thank you.