Sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women



Statement by

Ms. Gladys Acosta Vargas

Chair

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

New York, 15 March 2021

Chair,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Today is the first time that I have the honour to address this forum in my capacity as newly elected Chair of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

From among the many issues the Committee has worked on in the past 12 months, I would like to focus on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global inequalities; women's and girls' access to sexual and reproductive health and rights; the climate crisis; women's leadership and full participation in decision-making and political life; and gender-based violence against women.

Because of pre-existing inequalities, deep-rooted discrimination and feminized poverty, the COVID-19 pandemic impacts women in a disparate manner. It significantly increases women's risk of unemployment and poverty, mainly due to their over-representation in precarious and informal employment often without access to social protection. With the shutdown of educational institutions and children staying at home, many women and girls have been relegated to domestic roles. Online schooling is not an option for many girls and women who carry the burden of unpaid domestic or care work or lack the necessary resources to access the internet, especially in rural areas.

The Committee recognizes the pivotal, transformative role of education and employment for achieving gender equality and empowering women. In its contribution to the 2021 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, it calls on States and the international community to mobilize resources to ensure continuity of education and access by girls and women

to all levels of education, including non-traditional fields of study as well as inclusive education for girls with disabilities, in safe environments free from gender-based violence and discrimination. Similarly, its "Guidance Note on CEDAW and COVID-19", adopted in April 2020, recommends that States adopt COVID-19 recovery plans that promote transition of women from the informal to the formal economy, and provide social protection systems as well as economic stimulus packages specifically targeting women.

Access to sexual and reproductive health and rights is another essential element for empowering women and girls, as it enables them to decide over their bodies and pursue their educational and career choices. CEDAW regularly recommends that States parties provide age-appropriate sexuality education at all levels of education and ensure that women and girls have affordable access to modern forms of contraception and safe abortion and post-abortion services, including during the pandemic. In line with the Committee's jurisprudence, States parties should legalize abortion in cases such as rape, incest and threats to the life or health of the pregnant woman, and decriminalize it in all other cases. Moreover, the Committee systematically calls for the prohibition of child and forced marriage and other harmful practices that undermine women and girls own life choices.

At the inter-governmental level, the Committee is concerned that health challenges, economic and budgetary restrictions and border closures may hamper international solidarity, cooperation and development aid at a time when they are needed the most, particularly by women and girls in countries without robust support systems. States should address the risk of deepening poverty and inequalities by honouring their duty of international assistance and cooperation and by placing gender equality on top of the post-CIVD-19 recovery agenda.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has regrettably drawn the world's attention away from the climate crisis, it has not stopped hurricanes, floods and forest fires that are expressions of this crisis posing an existential threat to women and girls in many parts of the world. As reflected in CEDAW's General Recommendation No. 37 (2019) on the gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change, climate change an disasters affect women's and girls' health, safety and livelihoods disproportionately, in particular for disadvantaged groups such as rural or indigenous women and girls. In 2019, CEDAW issued a joint statement on "Human rights and climate change" together with other treaty bodies, welcoming the mobilization of civil society and, in particular, women, girls and youth and urging governments to take more ambitious action. The Committee believes that women and girls are active agents of change and essential partners in tackling the climate crisis. Ensuring their effective participation, in particular that of rural, indigenous and minority women, in climate policy-making at the local, national and international levels will ensure an inclusive approach that fully captures their direct experiences and ancestral knowledge in addressing the scale and complexity of the climate challenge.

To build back better, the world needs a paradigm shift based on inclusive and representative governance by 2030. CEDAW highlighted the transformative power of women's equal participation in political life and decision-making, including in the formulation, adoption and implementation of COVID-19 crisis response and recovery strategies, in its "Call for national action plans to achieve gender parity by 2030", jointly issued with the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) on International Women's Day 2021. Women account for only one quarter of Parliamentarians, slightly more than one fifth of ministerial portfolios and 5.9 and 6.7 per cent of Heads of State and Heads of Government, respectively, worldwide, according to IPU data – despite the

fact that women were among the leaders who have kept COVID-19 prevalence rates lower, and countries on track for recovery, as Secretary-General António Guterres stressed last week on 8 March. CEDAW therefore calls on States to recognize that inclusive and representative governance is an essential condition for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 5. States should seize this moment in history and adopt laws and policies guided by the principle of parity, incentives and sanctions to ensure that political parties nominate equal numbers of women and men candidates, and capping spending on electoral campaigns to achieve women's equal representation in political life by 2030.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated gender-based violence against women. Domestic tensions resulting from confinement, often in poor housing conditions, pressure of accompanying children during home schooling and job losses by women and men have triggered a "shadow pandemic" of increased reported violence of all forms against women and girls, in particular domestic and sexual violence. At the same time, pressure on national health systems worldwide has diverted resources from shelters, support and rehabilitation services for survivors of gender-based violence. In our "Guidance Note on CEDAW and COVID-19", we call on States parties to comply with their due diligence obligation to prevent and protect women from, and hold perpetrators accountable for, gender-based violence by ensuring women's access to justice, reparation, protection orders, shelters, medical, psycho-social and legal assistance and rehabilitation programmes.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, CEDAW has continued to carry out its mandated activities under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the only near universal treaty with 189 States parties that comprehensively protects women's rights, and under the Optional Protocol thereto. The Committee calls on those Members States

that remain outside the Convention to ratify it, including where we see women in very senior positions leading such States. It held three online sessions over the past year, despite technological challenges and limitations in terms of interpretation and accessibility for experts with disabilities as well as varying time zones, to avoid a protection gap for women and girls across the globe.

The Committee considered 28 States parties to the Convention under its State reporting procedure. In February, it reviewed the ninth periodic report of Denmark during its first-ever online dialogue and adopted concluding observations addressing issues such as women's leadership in COVID-19 recovery efforts, gender-based violence against women, sexual harassment, high abortion rates, and climate change. It also assessed the follow-up reports of 20 States parties under the follow-up to concluding observations procedure. In addition, the Committee adopted 18 lists of issues in relation to initial or periodic reports received from States parties and 9 lists of issues prior to reporting under the simplified reporting procedure. All of these lists of issues contain a new standard paragraph asking States parties about the impact of COVID-19 on women's rights, recovery and gender equality.

Under article 2 of the Optional Protocol, ratified by 114 States parties, CEDAW took action on 12 individual complaints. Most cases concerned non-refoulement and different forms of gender-based violence, including sexual violence in armed conflict, domestic violence, forced sterilization of Roma women, obstetric violence, human trafficking, and harassment of a woman human rights defender. Under article 8 of the Optional Protocol, the Committee published an inquiry report on female genital mutilation and adopted another inquiry report on rampant levels of domestic violence in the State party concerned, which will be published in May this year.

In November 2020, the Committee adopted General Recommendation No. 38 on trafficking in women and girls in the context of global migration, which urges governments to address the demand for trafficking and address the root causes that push women and girls into vulnerable situations, such as sex-based discrimination, including socio-economic injustices in home countries, gender-biased migration policies and asylum systems in foreign countries, as well as conflicts and humanitarian emergencies.

The Committee has continued to support the Platform of independent experts on the Elimination of Discrimination and Violence against Women, launched on the margins of the 62nd session of the Commission on the Status of Women, which brings together United Nations and regional independent expert mechanisms on the elimination of discrimination and violence against women. It has provided inputs for two e-booklets recently published by the Platform, one on the contribution of the Platform to the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action and another one a human rights approach in the implementation of strategies for the elimination of discrimination and violence against women before.

During the reporting period, CEDAW also issued several statements, sometimes jointly with other human rights treaty bodies, UN entities or international organizations, to draw attention to issues such as women as a leading force in global anti-racism protests, the shrinking civic space for "Women's activism in political processes", and "Sexual harassment against women and girls with disabilities".

In closing, I wish to thank our partners, including the Inter-Agency Group on CEDAW Reporting, comprising UN Women, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, IOM, and FAO, which continued to provide invaluable information online through relevant United Nations Country Teams; UNHCR; IPU; the

International Women's Rights Action Watch (IWRAW) Asia-Pacific that ensured that the voices of NGOs were heard during our online sessions; and the various national human rights institutions and local civil society representatives who provided country-specific information to the Committee.

Finally, let me thank OHCHR for its support as the Secretariat of CEDAW. The work of CEDAW has become more complex in these challenging times, yet the human and financial resources afforded by the Member States of the United Nations have not kept pace with the exigencies and the growth of our work, particularly under the individual communications and inquiry procedures. I remain hopeful that the outcome of the 2020 treaty body review process will address these resource issues so that the expectations placed on CEDAW by women across the world can continue to be met.

On behalf of CEDAW, I thank you for this opportunity to have addressed you.