Sixty-sixth 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, 14 March 2022

Madam Chair,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

As Chair of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against women, I wish to express our deep concern about the military attack against Ukraine and the grave humanitarian situation faced by the affected civilian populations, including large numbers of refugee women and children who are compelled to leave behind their loved ones and their homes. We call for an end to the hostilities and urge the parties to the armed conflict to intensify their efforts to seek a peaceful settlement and ensure the equal participation of women in peace processes, in line with UN Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security and the Committee's general recommendation No. 30 (2013) on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Committee, the monitoring body of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which is the only near universal treaty with 189 States parties that comprehensively protects women's rights.

One of the main achievements of the Committee over the past 40 years has been to ensure that the Convention covers all forms of discrimination against women, including gender-based violence against women, as defined in CEDAW's general recommendations No. 19 (1992) on violence against women and No. 35 (2017) on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No. 19. In general recommendation No. 19, CEDAW observed that the definition of discrimination in article 1 of the Convention includes gender-based violence, that is, violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately. In general recommendation No. 35, it found that the prohibition of gender-based violence against women has evolved into a principle of customary international law. Combatting gender-based violence against women features as a cross-

cutting theme in CEDAW's concluding observations under the State reporting procedure of the Convention and its jurisprudence under the Optional Protocol.

Gender-based violence against women is closely linked to this year's priority theme of the CSW: 'Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes'. CEDAW has explored this link in several of its 38 general recommendations that interpret the content and scope of specific rights or themes under the Convention – another milestone in the Committee's 40-year long history.

The degradation and destruction of natural resources exacerbate gender-based violence against women and girls. For example, climate crisis exposes women and girls who fetch water for their households to greater risks of sexual violence, as droughts mean that they have to travel greater distances. In its pioneer general recommendation No. 37 (2018) on the gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change, CEDAW calls on States to develop policies and programmes to address existing and new risk factors for gender-based violence against women, and promote the participation and leadership of women in their development.

In 2019, CEDAW issued a joint statement on "Human rights and climate change" with other human rights treaty bodies, welcoming the mobilization of civil society, 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.

We are alarmed by the increasing attacks, threats, harassment and killings faced by indigenous women human rights defenders advancing their environmental, land and territorial rights, and those advocating against the implementation of development projects without the free, prior and informed consent of the indigenous peoples concerned. They are particularly targeted due to their leadership, their defiance of socially expected roles and opposition to

particular economic interests. CEDAW is currently drafting a general recommendation on the rights of indigenous women and girls, calling on States to ensure the safety and support the work of indigenous women human rights defenders engaged in advocacy for environmental protection and climate justice, and that indigenous women and girls have equal opportunities to meaningfully participate in decision-making related to the environment, disaster risk reduction and climate change.

The COVID-19 pandemic has regrettably drawn the world's attention away from the climate crisis and from gender-based violence against women and girls. However, it has not stopped hurricanes, floods and forest fires from posing existential threats to women and girls in many parts of the world. Besides, the pandemic has exacerbated gender-based violence against women. Concerned by the risk of an erosion of the international multilateral system for protection from gender-based violence against women, CEDAW issued a statement in July 2021 expressing concern that the withdrawal by one Member State from the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) in the midst of the pandemic would have the potential to deepen the protection gap for women and girls during a time when gender-based violence is on the rise.

Until recently, the pandemic had also shifted the world's attention away from conflict-related gender-based violence. In November 2021, in a joint statement on 'Prevention, protection and assistance for children born of conflict-related rape and their mothers', CEDAW and the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) expressed concern about the grave consequences of sexual violence in conflict. The joint statement informed the analysis and recommendations of the Secretary-General's report 'Women and girls who become pregnant as a result of sexual violence in conflict and children born of sexual violence in conflict', which also refers to the frameworks of cooperation signed between the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on sexual violence in conflict and both Committees. In addition, CEDAW issued a joint

statement with the CRC in August 2021 urging the Taliban to uphold the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan, decided to request an exceptional report on their situation, and joined two recent joint media statements of human rights mechanisms calling for an end to the military attack against Ukraine and urgent protection of women's rights.

Throughout the pandemic, CEDAW continued to carry out its mandated activities under the Convention and the Optional Protocol. Following its fourth online session in June 2021, the Committee resumed its in-person sessions in Geneva in October/November 2021 and February 2022 to address its significant backlog of State party reports by reviewing 18 States parties. While CEDAW appreciates the return to in-person meetings, most of the dialogues with States parties had to be held on-line because of COVID-19-related restrictions preventing the travel of delegations to Geneva. Further reducing the current backlog of 50 State party reports will therefore require additional human and financial resources to support the work of CEDAW. Despite many difficulties such as the reduced interpretation time available on the online platform provided to the Committee, its limited accessibility for experts with disabilities and the impact of the pandemic on the travel of members, the Committee made significant progress over the past year. It adopted 18 concluding observations following constructive dialogues with States parties, 13 lists of issues in relation to initial or periodic reports received from States parties and 4 lists of issues prior to reporting under the simplified reporting procedure.

Under article 2 of the Optional Protocol, ratified by 114 States parties, CEDAW took action on 12 individual complaints, finding violations in cases concerning gender-based violence against women committed in the name of so-called honour, discrimination concerning entitlement to Indian status as First Nation descendants on the maternal line, and gender-based discrimination and violence against a lesbian activist. Under article 8 of the Optional Protocol, the Committee published the report of an inquiry on domestic violence. It also requested country visits in relation to several pending inquiry proceedings.

In June 2021, CEDAW held a virtual day of general discussion on indigenous women and girls with broad participation by States parties, experts and indigenous organizations, as part of the first phase in the development of a draft general recommendation. CEDAW also continued to harmonize its working methods with those of other treaty bodies. It adopted guidelines to address allegations of reprisals and acts of intimidation against individuals and organizations cooperating with the Committee. Importantly, it adopted a position paper on the treaty body strengthening process, including a predictable review cycle, focused reviews of State party reports and a digital uplift.

Before I close, 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 coordinated the remote NGO briefings during our 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 CEDAW's Secretariat. The work of CEDAW has become more complex, 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 we can continue to meet the expectations placed on CEDAW by women across the world.

On behalf of CEDAW, I thank you for this opportunity and stand ready to answer any questions you may wish to pose.