SPECIAL PROCEDURES
UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

Check against delivery

Ms. Reem Alsalem

UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls

New York, 09 March 2026

Commission on the Status of Women

70th session

Madame Chair of the CSW,

Madame director of un women,

Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

International treaties and declarations have long highlighted the importance of women and girls accessing justice as well as removing barriers to ensure that they can obtain reparations, protection, and accountability.

Thanks to the advocacy of feminists, civil society organizations and victims, the world has recognized the pivotal role that the effective access to justice plays in advancing sex and gender equality, ensuring non-repetition of crimes, and ultimately leading to fairer and more just societies.

And while important advances have been made, the ability of women and girls to access effective justice is facing an “existential” moment of crisis that we can no longer ignore.

Two recent developments particularly stand out for me:

First, the realization that we gained that whatever measures we have taken to ensure justice are grossly insufficient.

I would say this has become particularly clear following the release of the information on the atrocities committed by the Epstein criminal enterprise.

These concern the most shocking, heinous crimes that we have ever seen being committed against women and children, particularly girls.

They have been committed across the globe - for decades – all this while flaunting nauseating levels of impunity.

These crimes may amount to crimes against humanity and the failure of many governments to initiate investigations into the crimes for which they have jurisdiction is but one example of this collective failure to achieve justice.

They are but the tip of the iceberg of a wider systematic and disturbing trend.

Second, the respect for international humanitarian law and the law of armed conflict has sustained a damaging blow, and with the specific protections that these laws grant civilians, including women and girls, being eroded.

There is also an increasing and alarming weaponization of sexual, reproductive violence, slavery, and other forms of violence against women and girls as tools of war, as tools of subjugation and control, and – at times – as tools of genocide, as we have seen for example in Palestine, Sudan, Myanmar, and Afghanistan.

Yes, in Afghanistan, women and girls are intentionally being destroyed as a group for being female.

Women and girls are also amongst the first to be killed in illegal acts of aggression as those we have seen on Iran and Lebanon.

All courts- including international ones- have the necessary tools and concepts to adopt a more sex and gender specific lens to the crimes targeting women and girls such as for example the concept gender persecution.

These tools remain however grossly underutilized.

Both factors I have just mentioned have one thing in common:

They tell a story of absolute alarming levels of impunity and sky-high barriers in obtaining accountability; thereby cementing the message to half of society, and particularly girls, that their lives, dignity, safety, and security do not matter.

I would also argue that an integral part of justice is how we remember past atrocities.

Revictimization also often happens when victims are denied this opportunity to tell their story; when processes for truth telling and memorialization are abandoned or deprioritized.

Considering the above, I urge you, us all, NOT to conduct deliberations at this year's session in a shroud of "business as usual".

On the contrary, we all must continue to listen to the siren in the background, that reminds us about the epidemic of violence against women and girls globally

I close by leaving you with three thoughts to consider:

First, given our collective concern to avoid regression in standards and rights that have been hard won, we must recognize that the dilution of agreed on language and terminology that erase women, girls and female specific needs in law and in practice is a form of regression.

Since you cannot "protect what you cannot define" you cannot by extension advocate for the rights of a group you cannot define- including to access effective justice,

So are attempts to deviate from agreed on language to describe crimes that women and girls are disproportionately exposed to, under the false pretences that women and girls can consent to their own exploitation, abuse and loss of dignity.

For example, through replacing the term prostitution with the term "sex work."

Second, the justice system is but a reflection of how our wider societies function. If all aspects of our lives and systems are saturated with patriarchal norms, misogyny; if harmful stereotypes persist and are fermented, a model justice process will fall flat on its face.

And third, we must reject - and push- against efforts by the powerful who seek to justify illegal wars of aggression and expansionist colonial actions under a

fake banner of “women’s liberation” or as some form of legitimate defence of one’s own women and girls.

There can never justice in killing, starving, and raping more women and girls - no matter the cause or objective.

I thank you.