

Women as leading forces for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in the post-Covid-19 world

A. Historic strengthening strategies

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (the Convention), through its 189 States parties and the countless activists, civil society organizations, national human rights institutions, various United Nations organisations including its Secretariat in the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights, and regional organizations, supporting its implementation, is a crucial tool to ensure implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security, and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (the Committee) has fully integrated the SDGs in its work and played a crucial role in strengthening States parties' responsibility to accelerate their political commitments. In this regard, the Committee in 2019 adopted a [Guidance note for States parties for the preparation of periodic reports in the context of the SDGs](#), to invite States parties to provide updated information on the progress made in achieving them through the State reporting procedure under the Convention.

B. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The devastating impact and rapid spread of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis has seriously impacted the promotion and protection of human rights and has disproportionately affected women and girls, due to pre-existing gender inequalities, deep-rooted and often systemic discrimination, and lack of gender-balanced leadership. In light of the [Call for joint action in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic](#) and of the [Guidance note on CEDAW and COVID-19](#), and as outlined in the [Beijing +25: Women as leading forces of change](#) paper, the Committee has widely recognized that the realization of women's human rights requires gender transformative shifts, integrated approaches, and new solutions, particularly to advance gender equality and women's empowerment.

The Committee deplores that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities. It has significantly increased women's risk of unemployment and of living in poverty, mainly due to their over-representation in precarious and informal employment. Around the world, the Committee

has also observed an increase in domestic violence resulting from confinement which attests to gaps in the mechanisms currently in place to prevent gender-based violence against women, affecting the full achievement of SDG targets 5.2, 5.3, 4.1, 4.5 and 16.1 of the SDGs. The Committee notes that women represent 70% of the health workforce at the front-line. Nevertheless, unfortunately, women remain significantly under-represented in leadership positions and decision-making processes in the health sector.

In this regard, the Committee has expressed concern that the restrictions imposed to counter the pandemic may result in new forms of discrimination and gender-based violence against women, especially for women belonging to disadvantaged groups and women at the lower end of the economic scale, thereby impeding the achievement of SDG targets 8, 10.2 and 10.7. Furthermore, at the international level, health challenges, economic and budgetary restrictions, and border closures may hinder international solidarity, cooperation and development, and the full achievement of SDG 1 to end poverty in all its forms everywhere.

Gender-based violence against women is closely linked to gender inequalities. Since the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, statistical data and numerous reports have indicated that all forms of gender-based violence have intensified, triggering a "shadow pandemic", whereby one out of three women have suffered physical or sexual violence predominantly perpetrated by intimate partners or family members. As the increase in Covid-19 cases continues to put pressure on health systems worldwide, resources have been diverted from other services such as shelters for victims of gender-based violence against women or telephone helplines. Sexual harassment and new forms of gender-based violence are on the rise in public spaces and online. In this regard, the Committee stresses that action must be taken in all spheres of life, including political, social, economic, and religious, and urges State parties to prioritize combating gender-based violence against women.

Particular attention should be given to girls, who are directly impacted by the crisis, which may expose them to school dropout, and in the future unemployment and poverty. In line with the Generation Equality Forum, the Committee calls on States to mobilize resources for girls, with particular attention to inclusive schooling to meet the educational needs of girls with disabilities and girls belonging to ethnic, linguistic or religious minorities. The Committee believes that this unprecedented period is an historic opportunity for change, if guided by the principle of "leaving no one behind" enshrined in the SDGs.

C. Equality to rebuild better

The global health crisis is testing our commitment and adherence to the principles of gender equality, non-discrimination and solidarity at both the national and international levels. In line with SDG target 5.1 to end all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere, the Committee calls on State parties to seize this moment in history as an opportunity to adopt transformative strategies in line with the SDGs, aimed at women's equality, empowerment and leadership, for the benefit of women and girls worldwide. The Committee reiterates its recommendation that State parties focus on reshaping gender equality policies and put equality at the top of the post-COVID-19 recovery agenda by considering gender equality as a driving force of sustainable development and a crucial response to contemporary challenges, such as migration, climate change, poverty, and food security.

To remove all barriers and promote inclusive and representative governance by 2030, the Committee calls on State parties to strengthen the implementation of gender-sensitive policies and women's participation in decision-making processes. The Committee considers that cooperation with civil society and national human rights institutions (NHRIs) is essential to forge synergies for progress and transformative change.

Women, poverty and the economy (SDG 1 - End poverty in all its forms everywhere, SDG 2 – Zero Hunger, SDG 8 - Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all, SDG 12 - Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns)

Regarding *women, poverty, and economy*, and in line with the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action's call to "give women equal rights with men to economic resources", the Committee calls for strengthened accountability and transparency to ensure gender-sensitive strategies for the achievement of the SDGs. All social and economic recovery frameworks must sustain women's rights and empowerment. Economic empowerment requires a holistic approach that ensures women's ability to access productive resources, assets and digital communication tools, including their rights to land, housing, property, markets, economic value chains, inheritance, and social protection. In this regard, the Committee's General Recommendation No. 34 (2016) on rural women, reaffirms their rights to land, access to natural resources, including water, seeds and forests, and fisheries as fundamental human rights.

In line with General Recommendation No. 34 (2016), the Committee recognizes women's empowerment as a driving force for productive and sustainable agricultural models based on

women's leading role and training. The Committee has also consistently expressed concern about women's limited access to resources and disproportionate engagement in unpaid work, affecting in particular disadvantaged groups of women, including women with disabilities, women belonging to minorities, and migrant women. The Committee notes that the current crisis has a particularly negative impact on women employed in low-income jobs and in the informal economy, who are often not covered by social protection. Hence the Committee urges State parties to ensure social protection and socio-economic support to women, including post-COVID-19 recovery programmes with stimulus packages to ensure women's access to formal employment in both the private and public sectors as well as to entrepreneurial opportunities. As highlighted in its [General recommendation No. 38 \(2020\) on trafficking in women and girls in the context of global migration](#), the Committee notes that globalized macroeconomic and political factors, including the privatization of public goods, deregulated labour markets, the shrinking of the welfare State, and austerity measures forming part of structural adjustment policies and as an aid conditionality, often exacerbate unemployment and poverty and produce economic injustices that have a disproportionate impact on women. The Committee urges States parties to work towards the mobilization of public resources and the strengthening of public services in areas that support the achievement of gender equality and the promotion of the human rights of women and girls and sustainable development, in order to reduce the risk factors that lead to trafficking. It further recognizes that full achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals is essential in order to address the factors that heighten the risks of trafficking.

The Committee underlines the adverse impact of the persistent gender pay gap, women's low representation in decision-making positions, sexual harassment in the workplace, and women's underrepresentation in innovative sectors on women's equal participation in the labour market. The Committee further reiterates its concern about the low number of women and girls in non-traditional professions, including in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) as well as in information and communication technologies (ICT), due to persistent gender stereotypes that are often built-in in algorithms of online job advertisements and in artificial intelligence (AI). It urges State parties to rapidly rebalance women's representation in these fields, eliminate discriminatory algorithms and close the digital divide.

Women leadership and empowerment / fair governance (SDG 5 - Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls)

With regard to women's equal participation in political and public life, through its General Recommendation No. 23 (1997) on women in political and public life, the Committee stressed that

women's full participation in politics is essential not only for their empowerment but also for the advancement of society.¹ As stated in the [CEDAW/IPU statement on “Women’s political leadership: Striving for balance: 50/50 by 2030”](#), jointly issued on International Women’s Day 2019, women's leadership and equal participation with men in public affairs and decision-making is a matter of human rights, a key element of democracy and lasting peace, and a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development.

Data and statistics collected by the Committee show that women remain underrepresented at the political leadership level. The critical question that remains unanswered is how women can participate in the formulation of policy responses on an equal footing as men if the average level of women's representation in parliaments is only 25 percent. Recognizing and promoting women's roles as active drivers of change is, therefore, a precondition for sustainable development.

The Committee further calls on States parties to consolidate their legislative frameworks and ensure equal rights of women and men in all forms of family relations, including marriage and its dissolution, in line with General recommendation No. 21 (1994) on equality in marriage and family relations and General recommendation No. 29 (2013) on the economic consequences of marriage, family relations, and their dissolution.

The Committee also recommends that State parties, through temporary special measures in line with article 4, paragraph 1 of the Convention and the Committee’s general recommendation No. 25 (2004) on temporary special measures, such as statutory quota, a zipper system or incentives for political parties to nominate equal numbers of women and men as candidates on their electoral lists, adopt a new governance system that ensures women’s equal representation in political and public life by 2030, to achieve gender parity, enable women's empowerment and hence societal progress. Furthermore, women’s equal access to decision-making processes is a precondition for sustainable peace and democracy and a response to current challenges that the world is facing. Therefore, in light of the 2021 [“Joint Call by CEDAW and IPU for National Action Plans to achieve gender parity by 2030”](#), the Committee calls on State parties to ensure the development, adoption and effective implementation of national action plans to achieve gender parity by 2030.

¹ General Recommendation 23, para 17.

Similarly, the Committee urges States parties to combat gender stereotypes and promote women's active leadership roles in the political sphere and in public debate, including for women activists and youth, in order to accelerate gender parity and achieve equal representation of women and men in public life by 2030.

Health (SDG 3 - Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages)

Women's access to health care is a fundamental human right under article 12 of the Convention and further elaborated in General Recommendation No. 24 (1999) on women and health, which gives particular attention to women with HIV/AIDS and women with disabilities. The health-related aspects of gender-based violence against women, harmful practices, and inequality in family relations are also addressed under article 12 of the Convention. Under the State reporting procedure of the Convention as well as the individual complaint and confidential inquiry procedures of the Optional Protocol, the Committee regularly monitors State parties' compliance with their obligations to ensure women's access to health care, in particular sexual and reproductive health services, including for the most disadvantaged groups of women and girls.

Education (SDG 4 - Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all)

In relation to education and training for women, the Committee, in General Recommendation No. 36 (2017) on the right of girls and women to education, recognizes the pivotal, transformative and empowering role of education for achieving gender equality and empowering women. Inclusive education can empower girls, adolescent girls, and women at different stages of their life-cycle and equip them with the ability to claim and exercise broader socio-economic, cultural, and political rights, on an equal basis with boys and men. To achieve gender equality in all aspects of the education system, the Committee has consistently recommended that legislation, policies, education and learning environments must be gender-sensitive, accessible, responsive to the needs of girls and women, and transformative for all. Despite progress and ongoing efforts at the national level, more than half of the children out of school are girls. Worldwide, girls are more likely than boys to be out of school, 31 million girls are currently out of school, and only 40% of countries have equal enrolment of girls and boys.

Due to the closure of institutions in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is an urgent need to ensure continuity of education and access of girls to all levels of primary, secondary and tertiary

education and vocational training, particularly for girls belonging to minorities and other disadvantaged groups. The Committee recommends that special attention be given to promote non-traditional educational choices of girls and women, in particular in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) as well as information and communication technologies (ICT) and artificial intelligence (AI) studies. It also calls upon State parties to ensure girls have equal access to all programmes and career options in a safe environment, free from violence and discrimination.

Women, peace and security (SDG 16 - Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies)

In line with its General Recommendation No. 30 (2013) on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations, the Committee underlines the importance of equal participation and women's full involvement in all efforts to prevent conflict and promote peace and security. The Committee urges all actors to increase women's participation and mainstreaming of gender representation in all United Nations peace and security initiatives, and reiterates its concerns and recommendations on the situation of women and girls in conflict areas, including for those living in refugee camps. The Committee further recognizes the importance of women officers and activists and calls for establishing a framework to guarantee their role and action. It also calls for more effective measures to ensure women's equal representation in peace processes. Finally, the Committee underlines the commitment of State parties in the elaboration of national action plans and emphasizes the need for a strengthened evaluation of the actions undertaken with a view to ensuring respect for women's rights and their full participation in conflict prevention and peace building.

Climate change (SDG 13 - Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts and SDG 14 - Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources)

*Concerning the socially-differentiated impact of **climate change**,*² the Committee has stressed in its General Recommendation No. 37 (2018) on gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change, that women and girls, particularly those belonging to disadvantaged groups, such as rural women, internally displaced, refugee and migrant women, and indigenous women and girls, face disproportionate risks and impact of climate change and natural disasters on their health, safety, and livelihoods. With a view to consider women's rights and their empowerment as a precondition for sustainable development, the Committee calls on State parties to adopt

² Beijing Platform, Global Framework, para 46.

participatory, gender-responsive, and inclusive legislation, policies, strategies, and programs relating to disaster risk reduction and climate change across all sectors.³

The Committee's joint statement with the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on "[Human Rights and Climate Change](#)" (2019) welcomes the mobilization of civil society and, in particular, women, girls and youth, urging governments to take more ambitious action. The Committee strongly believes that ensuring the participation of both rural and indigenous women and protecting and promoting their role as women human rights defenders will ensure an approach that fully captures their direct experiences and ancestral knowledge and trigger empowering policies.

International partnership (SDG 17 - Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development)

While highlighting the importance of international cooperation on gender issues, the Committee is concerned that health challenges, budgetary and administrative restrictions, closed borders, and restricted movement may affect international solidarity. These trends can lead to setbacks in the advancement of women and aggravate poverty and inequality. State parties should adopt comprehensive strategies to accelerate the achievement of effective gender equality policies in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Convention, in order to ensure women's full and equal enjoyment of their human rights, eradicate gender-based violence against women, and strengthen the Committee's overall capacity to address current challenges.

³ See general recommendation No. 37 on the gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change (2018); general recommendation No. 27 (2010) on older women and the protection of their human rights, para. 25, and general recommendation No. 28 (2010) on the core obligations of States parties under article 2 of the Convention, para. 11. For concluding observations, see CEDAW/C/SLB/CO/1-3, paras. 40-41; CEDAW/C/PER/CO/7-8, paras. 37-38; CEDAW/C/GIN/CO/7-8, para. 53; CEDAW/C/GRD/CO/1-5, paras. 35-36; CEDAW/C/JAM/CO/6-7, paras. 31-32; CEDAW/C/SYC/CO/1-5, paras. 36-37; CEDAW/C/TGO/CO/6-7, para. 17; CEDAW/C/DZA/CO/3-4, paras. 42-43; CEDAW/C/NLZ/CO/7, paras. 9 and 36-37; CEDAW/C/CHI/CO/5-6, paras. 38-39; CEDAW/C/BLR/CO/7, paras. 37-38; CEDAW/C/LKA/CO/7, paras. 38-39; CEDAW/C/NPL/CO/4-5, para. 38; and CEDAW/C/TUV/CO/2, paras. 55-56.