

Concluding Sixty-Second Session, Women's Commission Approves Texts on Expediting Gender Equality in Rural Areas, Releasing Female Hostages, Helping Palestinians

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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN
SIXTY-SECOND SESSION, 13TH & 14TH MEETINGS (AM & PM)

The Commission on the Status of Women, concluding its sixty-second session today, approved a set of Agreed Conclusions aimed at accelerating gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls, as well as resolutions on assistance to Palestinian women, the release of women and children hostages and the impact of HIV/AIDS on women and the girl child. By the terms of the Agreed Conclusions — titled, “Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls” — the Commission emphasized the mutually reinforcing nature of those goals and the gender-responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Among other things, it expressed concern that rural women continued to be discriminated against, marginalized and economically and socially disadvantaged; urged Governments to enact laws to ensure women's land, property and inheritance rights; and called on stakeholders to address the digital divide that disproportionately affected rural women and girls.

Once finalized, the text of the Agreed Conclusions would be transmitted to the Economic and Social Council and its high-level political forum on sustainable development for inclusion in their work.

“This is a tipping point”, said Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Under-Secretary-General for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Executive Director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), in closing remarks. The time had come to end all forms of gender inequality, with young women in particular leading the way. Stressing that rural women and girls should always be present when decisions were being made about their lives, she said the Agreed Conclusions would help the international community address the special situation faced by women and girls in rural areas. Importantly, the text recognized that the lives of those women were not confined to agricultural production, but were also connected to such issues as infrastructure, education, climate change, unpaid care and domestic work, social protection policies and anti-discrimination laws.

Geraldine Byrne Nason (Ireland), Chair of the sixty-second session, said the Agreed Conclusions affirmed the Commission's commitment to work for the most vulnerable and leave no one behind. They provided concrete outcomes and addressed the real lives of rural women and girls around the world.

Many delegates welcomed the Agreed Conclusions, as well as the transparent and inclusive — albeit lengthy — negotiations that had led to their consensus adoption.

The representative of the Gambia, speaking on behalf of the African Group, said the text was particularly relevant to the African continent, where more than 80 per cent of women and girls lived in rural areas. The achievement of the 2030 Agenda would require focused and innovative policies to scale up women's access to education, quality health care, financial inclusion, access to markets and other development priorities, he said.

Some speakers expressed regret over the Agreed Conclusions' omission of particular issues. The representative of Yemen said those included the spread of diseases, such as cholera, and famine, both of which disproportionately affected rural women and girls. The representative of El Salvador was among several speakers who voiced concern over the absence of a reference to women migrants. Meanwhile, the representative of Bahrain, speaking on behalf of the Arab Group, disagreed with the use of such controversial terms as “sexual and reproductive rights”.

Taking up a draft of other texts, the Commission approved, by a recorded vote of 30 in favour to 4 against (Canada, Guatemala, Israel, the United Kingdom) with 11 abstentions, a resolution titled, “Situation of and assistance to Palestinian women” (document E/CN.6/2018/L.3). By its terms, the Commission recommended that the Economic and Social Council call upon the international community to continue to provide urgently needed assistance to Palestinian women and girls facing a dire humanitarian crisis under Israeli occupation.

Reaffirming that the occupation remained the major obstacle for the advancement, self-reliance and social integration of Palestinian women, the Council would demand that Israel, the occupying Power, comply fully with the provisions and principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Geneva Conventions and other international covenants, to protect the rights of Palestinian women and their families. It would also urge the international community to renew efforts to advance and accelerate the conclusion of a peace treaty, ending the Israeli occupation, in accordance with the internationally recognized two-State solution.

The representative of Egypt, introducing that text on behalf of the "Group of 77" developing countries and China, said the crisis in the Occupied Palestinian Territory continued to severely affect women and girls. The draft had been updated to reflect current realities on the ground, including a preambular paragraph noting that the Palestinian people had marked the passage of 50 years of occupation in 2018.

Prior to the vote, the representative of the United Kingdom said that in a continued drive to advance gender equality for all, it was important to refrain from singling out one country in resolutions, as the text had singled out Israel. As such, his delegation would vote against the politicized text.

The representative of Israel said the draft had nothing to do with the situation of Palestinian women. Instead, the Palestinians preferred to spend their time and energy targeting Israel, she said, adding that the Secretary-General's report had shown that gender discrimination and violence against women existed in Palestinian communities. Israel had called for a vote on the politicized draft resolution and would vote against it.

The representative of Estonia, speaking on behalf of several European Union States, raised deep concerns about the impact of the conflict on Palestinian women. As such, her group would abstain from the vote. The European Union was in the opinion that country-specific issues should not be dealt with in such a manner.

Making a general statement, the representative of the United States said her delegation had long-standing concerns, including the inclusion of political elements and anti-Israel bias. The Commission must refocus its energy on shared goals. For decades, the United States had been the largest donor to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and other programmes reaching Palestinian women, she said. But, she raised concerns about discrimination that continued unchecked. Any peace settlement had to be the product of direct negotiations with both sides.

The representative of Canada, speaking after the vote, said her country's feminist international policy included support for the empowerment of Palestinian women and the provision of gender-responsive humanitarian aid. However, Canada could not support a one-sided resolution that did not advance the prospects of a two-State solution, she said, rejecting any attempt to politicize the issue.

The representative of Brazil voiced concern about the precarious social and economic conditions affecting Palestinian women and called on the Commission to address the issue in a balanced manner, reiterating her country's support for a two-State solution that included internationally recognized and mutually agreed borders.

The representative of the State of Palestine, thanking those Commission members that had voted in favour of the resolution, said Palestinian women and their families continued to bear the brunt of the Israeli occupation. The text's adoption sent a strong message that rights violations by the occupying Power were illegal and must be halted, and that Israel must be held accountable. Her delegation had never claimed that it did not share the same challenges as other women and girls around the world, she said, but only emphasized that it did so while also living under a brutal military occupation.

The Commission also approved, without a vote, a resolution titled, "Release of women and children taken hostage, including those subsequently imprisoned, in armed conflicts" (document E/CN.6/2018/L.4). By its terms, the Commission condemned all violent acts against civilians and called for the immediate release of women and children taken hostage as well as those imprisoned in armed conflicts. It urged States that were parties to armed conflict to take measures to determine the identity, fate and whereabouts of women and children taken hostage, and pass such information on to their families, as well as to fully respect the norms of international humanitarian law and provide safe, unimpeded access to humanitarian assistance for women and children.

The representative of Azerbaijan, one of the text's main co-sponsors, spoke after its adoption, noting that the increase in the number of conflicts around the world — and their disproportionate impact on women and children — meant the United Nations must play a greater role in raising awareness about the phenomenon of hostage-taking.

In addition, the Commission approved a consensus resolution on “Women, the girl child and HIV and AIDS” (document E/CN.6/2018/L.5), as orally amended by the representative of South Africa. By its terms, the Commission welcomed a report of the Secretary-General on that topic (document E/CN.6/2018/8), submitted pursuant to one of the Commission's 2016 resolutions. Reiterating its commitment to that text, and urging Member States to accelerate their implementation efforts, the Commission requested the Secretary-General to submit an additional progress report on the matter during its sixty-fourth session in 2020.

Speaking on that issue, the representative of the United States raised concerns about the spread of HIV, stressing that all sectors and diverse partners must work together on projects. The resolution did not change the current state of customary law, she said, emphasizing that all countries had a role to play.

In other business, the Commission approved a consensus text titled, “Twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women” (document E/CN.6/2018/L.7). By its terms, the Commission asked the Economic and Social Council to recommend that the General Assembly convene a one-day high-level commemorative meeting on the margins of the general debate of its seventy-fifth session, aimed at accelerating the realization of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Also approved were a text containing a report on its sixty-second session (document E/CN.6/2018/L.1), which was introduced by Commission Vice-Chair-cum-Rapporteur Koki Muli Grignon (Kenya); the provisional agenda and documentation for its sixty-third session (document E/CN.6/2018/L.2), which listed as that session's priority theme “social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls”; and a text titled, “Future organization and methods of work of the Commission on the Status of Women” (document E/CN.6/2018/L.6). The Commission took note of the following documents: “Normative aspects of the work of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women” (document E/CN.6/2018/2) and reports of the Secretary-General on “Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls”, and on the “Review of the implementation of the agreed conclusions from the forty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women”, contained in documents E/CN.6/2018/3 and E/CN.6/2018/4. It also took note of the corrigendum to the report of the Secretary-General on “Women, the girl child and HIV and AIDS” (document E/CN.6/2018/8/Corr.1).

In addition, it considered notes by the Secretary-General on the “Report of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women on the activities of the United Nations trust fund in support of actions to eliminate violence against women” (document A/HRC/38/3-E/CN.6/2018/9); and by the Secretariat on “Results of the sixty-seventh and sixty-eighth sessions of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women” (document E/CN.6/2018/12). Also noted were the Chair's summaries of ministerial round tables, high-level dialogues and expert panels held during the session, contained in documents E/CN.6/2018/13; E/CN.6/2018/14; E/CN.6/2018/15; E/CN.6/2018/16; E/CN.6/2018/17; E/CN.6/2018/18 and E/CN.6/2018/CRP.2, the latter to be issued as document E/CN.6/2018/19.

Briefly opening its sixty-third session, the Commission, by acclamation, elected Koki Muli Grignon (Kenya) as Vice-Chair, joining Rena Tasuja (Estonia) and Mauricio Carabalí Baquero (Colombia) in that capacity. Ms. Nason recalled that, having been elected to serve for two years, she would remain Chair for the Commission's next session. Meanwhile, Belgium and the Russian Federation were appointed to serve as members of the Working Group on Communications at the sixty-third session.

Also delivering statements were the representatives of Mauritania, Papua New Guinea (on behalf of the Pacific Islands Forum), Iran, Tunisia, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Hungary, India and Sudan, as well as the Permanent Observer of the Holy See.

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