

# **“Think equal, build smart, innovate for change”: Our continued struggle for gender justice & equality**

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(Rome, Italy) — International Women’s Day is an opportunity for celebration, but also for observing critically where we are now.

In the global food and agricultural system, women are of heightened importance, playing a significant role in every stage of the productive chain from cultivation, distribution and sale of food. In fact, in an age when many countries are experiencing a “feminization of agriculture,” women and girls are carrying the burden of ensuring food and nutrition security for their families and communities in addition to their traditional responsibilities at home. Most of the time women are unpaid workers.

Female farmers, for example, are responsible for cultivating, ploughing and harvesting more than 50% of the world’s food. In the fishery sector alone, which is traditionally under the control of men, women account for more than half of the workforce responsible for the processing, sale, and trade of fish, performing this work under very harsh working conditions. Yet women also account for 70% of the world’s hungry and are more vulnerable to malnutrition and hunger because of their reproductive capacity. I am reporting on these human rights violations through the United Nations platform to the governments and civil societies.

I also observe and report good policies and initiatives. I would be remiss if I did not highlight the efforts that WFP has made in supporting women’s empowerment relevant to today’s specific agenda. For example, the “Buy from Women” [platform](#) a joint initiative by WFP and UN women was launched in Rwanda in 2016 as a data-driven, open source and mobile enabled supply chain system to connect women farmers to information, finance and markets. Among other benefits, the platform enables women to sign contracts with maize buyers, forging stronger links to markets. The platform also sends regular text messages informing women about new business opportunities, agricultural practices and women’s rights.

More recently, the UN Women and World Food Programme (WFP) [introduced](#) blockchain to assist Syrian refugee women participating in UN Women’s cash for work programs at the Za’atari and Azraq refugee camps in Jordan. Such an initiative has the potential to empower women in a seemingly impossible situation, as women are disproportionately impacted in crisis and emergency settings. We need more robust partnerships to strengthen these and similar efforts. Armed conflicts, and the subsequent break down of rule of law and governing systems, create a dangerous environment particularly for women and girls.

Rural and indigenous women face heightened threats posed by climate change, natural disasters, land and soil degradation, water pollution, pesticides and agro-chemicals, as well as loss of biodiversity. These barriers make it more difficult for women to realize their right to food and enjoy other human rights.

Today is, therefore, not just cause for celebration, but also a sobering reminder that women continue to have to fight twice as hard just to get a seat at the table, and yet continue to experience unparalleled discrimination and neglect. As we hear from so many prominent leaders, and feminist activists today and pay homage to the women who are paving the way for gender equality, we must force ourselves to ask why, in this day and age, we are satisfied to designate just one day to recognize women when the truth is that women deserve recognition all 365 days of the year.

In my tenure as the Special Rapporteur, I have had the honor of meeting and working, from near and far, with many extraordinary women, who are collectively working towards realizing the right to food and human rights for all. I had very many memorable experiences showing me how women to women work and solidarity can change many things that make small and big differences at every level. Women as “transformative agents” is not an empty phrase.

Turning to the specific theme of today, inequalities in gender, income, wealth, access to justice, access to resources, technology, and innovation constitute fundamental challenges to the dignity and human rights for every human being. Just few days ago, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, addressed the 40th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, on the 6 March 2019. It was an unusually strong message pinpointing human right violations and violence around the world. Her main message was inequality. I quote:

*“Inequalities stir grievances and unrest; fuel hatred, violence, and threats to peace; and force people to leave their homes and countries. Inequalities undermine social progress, and economic and political stability. But human rights build hope. They bind humanity together with shared principles and a better future, in sharp contrast to the divisive, destructive forces of repression, exploitation, scapegoating, discrimination – and inequalities.”*

Gender discrimination and inequality create structural stumbling blocks to access of all resources and possibilities for women. Among women, the most vulnerable are indigenous peoples, minorities, the disabled, rural dwellers, and those who are simply poor, groups typically subject to multiple discrimination. Discrimination renders them invisible. They are often not even included in statistics.

Those categories of women are increasingly at the forefront of fights against inequality and injustice, engaged as human rights activists.

However, women human rights defenders face the additional barriers of economic and other structural discrimination, and “unique challenges driven by deep rooted discrimination against women and stereotypes entrenched in patriarchal societies related to gender and sexuality”. On the occasion of the celebration of International Women Human Rights Defenders Day, 29 November 2019, the statement of several UN Special Rapporteurs emphasized that “women

human rights defenders are pivotal in promoting sustainable peace, yet they are constantly excluded from peace processes and politics, often criminalized, and they experience gender-based violence, which hampers their participation in decision-making processes...The current global context of unchecked authoritarianism along with the rise of populism, of corporate power and of fundamentalist groups, have contributed to the closing of the space for civil society.”

[Women](#) human rights defenders are critical for the promotion of peace, yet they are too often excluded from the conversation. Those women who choose to speak out and advocate for their rights are also being unacceptably shut down, and too often, this silencing is deadly.

In 2017, Front Line Defenders recorded that 44 women human rights defenders were killed; an increase from 40 in 2016 and 30 in 2015. Women should not be criminalized, threatened, or killed for speaking out. It is our collective responsibility to foster a better, more inclusive society where such consequences no longer occur.

Rural and indigenous women’s activism when it comes to land rights is an especially illustrative example. Land grabbing, unfair land distribution, development projects, environmental degradation, extractive industries, and climate change have all placed increased stress on many rural communities. In many cases, increasing contestation around land has resulted in mass displacement, which has particularly detrimental impacts for rural women. Rural and indigenous women have been at the forefront of many of the efforts to resist unfair demands to concede their lands, and many have met with extreme and sometime even fatal violence.

In their report '[Deadly Environment](#)', Global Witness had previously warned that violence against land rights activists, many of whom are rural women, was surging. Around the world, we have seen such cases of violence with striking similarities: on 19 October 2012, indigenous anti-mining activist [Juvy Capion](#) and her two young sons were shot dead by soldiers of the 27th Infantry Battalion in the Philippines. In Thailand, on 19 November 2012, activists [Montha Chukaew and Pranee Boonrat](#) were shot and killed for their work campaigning for the right to agricultural land. In Brazil, in August 2015, community leader [Maria das Dores Salvador Priante](#), was kidnapped, tortured and murdered as a result of her land rights advocacy. The list goes on.

We have also seen the tragic killing in Honduras of [environmental and indigenous rights advocate Berta Cáceres](#), who, ironically, was found shot dead inside her home in La Esperanza on the same day that the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women released its new [General Recommendation No. 34 on the Rights of Rural Women](#). The General Recommendation highlights rural women human rights defenders’ risk of violence when working to protect victims, transform local customs or secure natural resource rights.

In his most recent report, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Michel Frost, explained that attacks on women activists are rising in the context of today's backlash against women's human rights. Women face the same risks as men, but with additional threats shaped by a view that women should be bound to the service of a male-dominated society. Physical and sexual violence, public shaming and attacks on their families and children are among the tactics increasingly used to silence women activists.

The report also mentioned the recent killing of anti-corruption activist Kateryna Handzyuk in Ukraine who was attacked by an unknown man with sulfuric acid, and died three months later on 31 July 2018. The killing was one in a series of brutal attacks against human rights defenders, crimes for which few perpetrators have been brought to justice.

Most recently, six human rights defenders were killed during the first week of 2019. One of them was Martiza Quiroz Leiva the leader of a group of Afro-Columbian women who have been victims of forced displacement in rural areas. Suad Al-Ali, was shot dead in the city of Basra while defending social economic rights. Juana Raymundo, a 25-year old indigenous leader, was tortured and killed in Guatemala. Razan Al-Najjar, the Palestinian paramedic was shot and killed near the Gaza border on 2 June 2018 while helping wounded people. On 22 December 2017, Syrian Human Right defenders Oruba Karakat and Halla Barakat were killed. We should at least remember and celebrate their lives after they left us. We need to show the world that we will not forget them and their fights for justice and rights in their communities.

To conclude on a note closer to home in this room, I want to report that women are increasingly participating in public life, holding somewhat more important positions throughout the world. It is still a long way to reach substantive equality, rather than a showing of exception, or notable statistics. In fact, even the statistics are not good: according to a recent survey, the representation of women in legislative institutions is still not promising. In the European Parliament, the percentage of women is only 36.1 %. At the national level in Europe, this figure is lower, at only 30.2 %. Worldwide, 26 countries have 36.1% or more of women members in their national parliament. No country in Europe has yet reached the 50% level, but elsewhere we have three champions: Rwanda, Cuba and Bolivia. The top 10 countries with the highest representation of women in government, includes only Sweden in Europe, with the rest in Africa and Latin America. (As of December 2018, Women in National parliaments, EU survey)

Zeroing in even further to the United Nations system, despite achieving full gender parity in the Senior Management Group in 2018, there is still a long way to go. According to the UN Secretariat Gender Parity Dashboard, women comprise 70% of positions at the lowest P1 level, but the presence of women becomes notably reduced, overshadowed by men at the higher professional and executive level grades.

We should do better, and we will. Happy international women's day, and hope next year we will have better news to share.