



**Advancing Gender Equality and Women's Rights  
in the Field of Sexual and Reproductive Health**

**World Social Work Day 2019**

United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights

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"Social Work, Gender and Sexuality—Towards Empowerment, Equality and Inclusion"

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It is an honour to join you in celebration of the World Social Work Day. Our warm thanks to the International Association of Schools of Social Workers, the Social Workers Faculty of Geneva, and the UN Research Institute for Social Development. And personal thanks to Professor Anne Lavanchy from the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western of Switzerland and Joël Gapany, Director, School of Social Work Fribourg.

Friends, perhaps you recall that in October 2016, and against all expectations, the people of Colombia rejected a proposed peace agreement – doing so by a very narrow margin of less than .04%.

The fear that the peace agreement as proposed would mean a “peace with impunity” was one of the better-known public concerns. However, in the lead up to the referendum itself, an ultimately successful opposition campaign gained remarkable momentum, thanks to the “vote no” campaign’s warning that the proposed peace accord would, and I quote, “put Colombia in danger of ... the imminent passage of a gender ideology.”

Now let’s just stop and think about that for a moment: an end to one of the world’s longest civil conflicts; an end to forced recruitment into combat services; demilitarization of the countryside; and enhanced prospects for enjoyment by Colombians of all rights, should be opposed because of the threat of “gender ideology”.

Friends, if more wisely, you had invited here instead my fellow Swiss resident, Ms Tina Turner, she may have expressed her consternation more eloquently: *“What’s gender got to do, got to do with it?”*

When district and national constitutional reform processes are dogged by anti-gender campaigns; when a president uses his weekly TV programme to lecture against the abomination of “gender ideology”; when a campaign against “gender ideology” derails needed reform of public education curricula; when a constitutional Court cites “gender ideology” as it strikes down progressive gender-identity legislation; when a law aimed at curtailing gender-based violence is viciously opposed for its “wicked threat to traditional values”; when a bill cynically entitled “Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance” imperils \$8.8 billion of funding for HIV/AIDS, of funding for health systems strengthening; for water, sanitation and hygiene programming; targeting sexual and reproductive health and rights in order to prevent provision of information, advocacy, referrals and services for legal abortion; risking tragic reversal of life-saving gains for women, children and adolescents; when such a bill is drafted in the face of all evidence that it will not decrease rates of abortion overall – just increase rates of unsafe abortions; when delegations on the floor of the UN General Assembly go – line by line – through each and every resolution to the Commission on the Status of Women seeking to remove the word “gender”; when gender equality and LGBTQI rights are confidently portrayed by government representatives as “neo-colonial impositions”, you gotta know Ms Tina Turner’s question demands an answer!

From Chile to Croatia, from Australia to Austria, from sub Saharan Africa to Eastern Europe and Central Asia – in every region of the world today – politics, law and faith are combining in a mendacious partnership that despite, and perhaps in reaction to, recent advances, seeks to give a new

lease of life to gender-based bigotry, gender-based hatefulness and, ultimately, gender-based violence.

Now it is important to put this in perspective: governments today, after all, are a little overwhelmed. I mean, they are confronting the failures of growth-dependent globalized economics which have brought us deeper levels of inequality within and between countries. They do have the impacts of crisis, conflict, contagion and climate change to contemplate – forces driving more people to flee their homes than at any time since World War II.

Of course, there is the question of global warming's consequences too – which are approaching likely irreversible levels. No doubt leaders are somewhat mesmerized by the fact that 60% of the world species have been rendered extinct in the last 50 years alone – that is a concern.

And, of course, the daily business of government has never been more challenging, with data on matters large and small flying around the globe at the speed of light, at the push of a button, challenging all our analogue notions of privacy, security and community. And, don't forget that alive today is the largest generation ever of young people, a majority finding themselves in places of poverty and conflict – looking on in despair and frustration.

Really, the State has a lot going on. So, of course, it would want to spend its scarce time, energy and resources campaigning against gender equality ... not! What can have gone wrong?

Perhaps, the universal normative standards on gender equality are too unclear?

And yet here we are, with the benefit of the more than one hundred years that have passed since the – albeit gradual and begrudging – political enfranchisement of women began. We are 70 years on from the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, acclaimed at the time by all UN member states; 40 years since the passage of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women; and a quarter of a century since the Beijing Women’s Conference’s emphatically affirmed that those universal rights are also women’s rights.

With far more legislation in place to defend us against gender discrimination; with far more girls in school and even in university, too; with many more women in public life; with far greater evidence of the unconscionable suffering that denial of women’s rights imposes; with years of irrefutable proof that violations of sexual and reproductive health rights are life depriving: how can it be that, here we are, yet again – and will be no doubt tomorrow, too – stepping up to reaffirm, defend, explain and assert that fundamental humanizing notion that women, LGBTQI people, adolescents, too, have human rights – fundamental rights – rights from the courtroom to the boardroom to the classroom to the bedroom? Seriously?

Perhaps the problem is that in the great cost/benefit calculations made by our policy makers, gender equality is just not worth the effort? Or perhaps its benefits accrue only to some?

Yet, evidence of how we all benefit from gender equality is well established: States do know – for the experts have made it clear – that advancing gender equality can improve the quality of life for all of us:

- **Where there's more gender equality, there's more peace.**

Gender equality is a much more reliable predictor of peace than is a country's GDP or its level of democracy.

- **Gender equality is an economic multiplier.** Eliminating barriers to women's workforce participation, and promoting women's participation and leadership, drives up economic growth, stability and resilience.

- **Gender diversity in leadership roles actually boosts business performance.** Companies with the highest levels of diversity (gender, ethnic, racial) are anywhere from 15% to 35% more likely to have financial returns above their industry's national average [2015 McKinsey report "Why Diversity Matters", by Vivian Hunt, Dennis Layton and Sara Prince].

Perhaps, the issue is that we don't understand the high price our communities are paying for the cruelties of gender inequality?

Gender-based violence; wage inequality; preventable maternal mortality not prevented; child marriage; gender discrimination's cruel multi-lane intersections with race, age, disability, gender identity and sexual orientation – meaning that gender-based inequality is all the more hateful for women of colour, for women seeking asylum, for women fighting for land rights against rapacious developers, for women fighting for press freedom against press monopolies, for those standing up for sexual and reproductive rights against these distorting so called family values. Friends, we do know its cruel costs ...

So, maybe – the impediments to gender equality are there because it's just all too much, too soon, for so many of us and we just aren't ready to be equal?

Confucius said “*One hundred women are not worth a single testicle*”. Napoleon Bonaparte was sure that “*Women are nothing but machines for producing children*”. In equally tweet-able form, but centuries later, celebrated US author Norman Mailer mused publicly that “*A little bit of rape is good for a man’s soul*”. South Africa’s former President Zuma was moved to observe that “*I wouldn’t want to stay with daughters who are not getting married ... that in itself is a problem in society. ... kids are important to a woman because they actually give an extra training to a woman, to be a mother*”. His US contemporary, G Gordon Liddy, too, was concerned by the threat that the body feminine poses to rational processes – in his case those of the US Supreme Court – and he found it necessary to call out: “*Let’s hope that the key conferences aren’t on when [Judge Sonia Sotomayor] is menstruating or ... or just before she’s going to menstruate. That would really be bad. Lord knows what we would get then*”.

Frankly, I am quite puzzled by those who dispute the idea that universal values enduringly underpin our human community; by those who argue further that equality – and specifically, gender equality – are somehow (Western) modernity’s ideological invention.

I am confused. Because, assertions of gender-based identity and gender-defined superiority have been with us as far back as we can recall. Defense of gender inequality would not have been necessary – in the past or today – were there not also, always – present and contemporaneous – advocates for the opposite idea – that of gender equality.

There is no – and nor was there ever – any legislation dictating the sun’s daily rise, nor any presuming a need to advise the moon of its monthly cycle. These events “quotidian” are in dispute nowhere and at no time – because a credible, opposing or contrary proposition simply did not and does not exist.

Clearly Confucius, however, felt obliged to assert that the measure of a woman is less than 1% of a testicle because even then – in 500 BC China – there were assertions of her equality, or at least of far more generous accounts of her net worth – which had to be dismissed.

This is important: claims for gender equality are as old as are the counter-claims.

So, just to summarize – gender inequality and opposition to efforts to redress that are wrong – wrong by breach of promise under international norms; wrong by its cruel consequences in practice; wrong in that it is against the interests of society as a whole; wrong in that defense of gender inequality is a-factual – running counter to the evidence. And, today, proponents of gender inequality are wrong, too, on a major strategic scale – given our global context and its reality that the largest generation of children history has ever seen are today making their journey through adolescence into adulthood – inevitably, unavoidably, necessarily making their sexual and reproductive health journeys into their gendered adult identities.

Friends,

Gender-based discrimination is a reckless, unfounded, unjust systemic imputation of characteristics and attributes to groups of people

who may have nothing more than genitalia in common. It seeks an intricate confinement of human capability and contribution – narrowing and distorting; hindering and stifling talent, diversity and potential. It seeks to justify unjust gendered-basis for the distribution of power, opportunity and influence. It seeds the roots of gender-based violence and related human rights abuses.

The ranks of its unaccountable constructors are legion, of course, and emboldened, as we have learned, by the fruits of their impunity – technology’s geeks, Hollywood’s fat cats; sports’ stars; parliaments’ pontificates; the cardinals of church, commerce and culture – powerful actors the world over readily lending their hands to the task of securing for themselves the bounty of this narrowly construed masculinity that depends for its enjoyment on the degradation of the non-masculine ...

This is an intentional, well-resourced, organized effort seeking to replenish its strength today in the fertile soil of people’s hopes dashed by the failure of global development efforts to deliver for people equally, fairly, justly.

And in between the extremists/fundamentalists, and those whom globalization has never benefited, stretches out the populist politics of hundreds of politicians and an increasing number of political leaders, who cynically strive to benefit from this toxic brew. How intriguing to discover that the promotion of gender inequality – of gender-based hate – is an old and familiar tool by which populist movements seek to embed their wicked harvesting of the fruit of our worst fears, anxieties and our bleakest fantasies.

But I hear Ms Turner calling again ... “What’s social work got to do, got to do with it ...”

Well, I would say – everything! ... If the interface between the self, intimate identity and communal belonging is not our business, then whose is it? If the place of the individual in our dynamics of intimate and communal relations, in our ecologies of dignity, in our systems of justice is not of concern to us, then what is? If it is not our business, not the business of social work, then what is?

If address of intimate, binding, blinding, gender inequality is not social work’s business – social work’s concern – then whose is it? It is far from a burden on social work alone, of course, but standing at the intersection of a range of academic disciplines, social work has a unique ability, and thus responsibility, to approach the social from the standpoint of the person – of the intimately, individualized, rights-holding human being. And, that standpoint is all that human rights in turn asks of any of us – that the person always be seen as an individual first and then as an actor – an agent in their own lives – and never as a silent, compliant, inert vessel for carriage submissively into their lives by uncontested faith, culture, politics or ideology.

How can we, as social workers, not resist when the State makes of law and policy a weapon against those who, by other means, are already marginalized, subjected to bigotry and discrimination – such as LGBTQI persons, people living with HIV, or sex workers – providing illicit licit cover for those such as the police and other state officials to perpetrate violence and other abuses, often with impunity?

How can we not stand up against the majorities and minorities, the stratifications that bring such grave consequences for the person disabled; the person indigenous; the person of African descent; the person of minority standing; the person who is an intravenous drug user; the person who is a sex worker; the LGBTQI person?

How can we not resist in those many places where authorities are so quick to denounce consensual love, and yet so accepting of bigotry and hate; so slow to hold accountable the perpetrators of the non-consensual?

How can such a profession tolerate, for even one minute more, the practices and policies that render into sources of fear, of shame, even of self-loathing, our children's most intimate selves – their innate and gendered identities? How can we possibly be made complicit with the failure to provide our children the shelter of accurate comprehensive information; leaving them exposed to the harsh elements of ignorance, of exploitation; denying them the informed choices that are theirs by right? How can we stand by as adults still weave out of children's emergence into their gendered, sexualized identities, the fabric of ostracization, of exclusion, of exploitation, of violence?

The greatest threat to gender equality for those who today are children takes no funding to change, little effort to fix: we just need to engage adults' silence, adults' shame and adults' systematic denial that, at its heart, the journey from childhood to adulthood is also a sexual and gendered journey. The toll of death and indignity exacted from adults' shame-filled hypocrisy – it is that of which we really all should be ashamed.

These politics of shame and disgust directed against the body gendered and intimate must be challenged and usurped. Not because sex – and the respect, pleasure and regard that it, at its best, should express – matters more than food, shelter, education or justice but because it matters just as much.

In an era of austerity, at a time of frugality, when the planet is straining under scarcity, how can it be that we should tolerate such contemptible waste of that most precious resource – the talent, capability and contribution of all people – our most renewable energy. In this, sexual and reproductive health rights are not optional, ideologies, or luxuries – they are life-saving, life enhancing essentials. To this end, it's time that adults grow up.

Friends, masculinity and femininity are not our primordial states – human-inity is!

You don't have to be like me to respect my rights. I don't have to be like you to uphold your rights. We do not have to agree with each other to defend each other's rights. Rights are not a beauty parade or a reward system. They are not some kind of nepotistic prize for good behavior as defined by arbitrary standards. Rights for the best and the worst of us. Rights are simply that which cannot, with legitimation, be taken from us. Rights for every one of us – with the exception of none of us – for the inclusion of each of us, in the interests of all us.

And we must insist that the law – human rights-based law – delivers comprehensively gender equality and non-discrimination for all, in all circumstances and under all climates, without exception.

Rights activist and artist Billy Holliday did so when, with a poet's voice, she sang out against the lynching of black Americans in the southern United States:

*“Southern trees bear strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root / Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.”*

Today, in this world that so casually betrays hard-won universal principles, that flourishes so readily the bitter bounty of xenophobia, seeds so easily the toxic harvest of hatred and bigotry, there is yet again, strange fruit budding on populist trees: assassinations of women human rights defenders; imprisonment of women journalists; arbitrary detention of women political dissidents; removal of activists' passports; rejection at our borders of the women refugee in flight; indiscriminate rounding-up of women wrongly denied access to citizen rights; outlawing of consensual love; bullying of trans children for their gender identity; sexual violence against women just because he can; rape of little girls disguised through marriage; defunding of essential sexual and reproductive health services; deprivation of choices over our own bodies!

Should such daily, banal manufactured cruelties pass us by unremarked? Are basic qualities of equalities to be eroded without resistance? NO! Stand up we must and stand up we will. Stand up for that which is most precious – the fact, the reality, that you and I are born equal in dignity and rights.

*“What's love got to do with it?”* Everything.

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