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'War on Women' needs forceful response, not glib statements

By Shada Islam

EU Observer (06.07.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3o9l2Oa> - Across the world, women's rights are under assault. This global war on women demands urgent international attention — and a forceful collective response.

Feel-good tick box references to gender equality of the kind made in last week's long-winded and largely unreadable official G7 and Nato statements are not enough.

Twenty-five years after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, not a single UN member has achieved gender equality.

Discrimination based on gender is happening in democracies and autocracies, in secular societies and religious ones, in rich and poor nations.

Orientalist and Islamophobic tropes notwithstanding, it is not just a problem "over there" in the Global South and in Muslim majority states. It is also a blight on the face of too many Western democracies.

The US Supreme Court's decision to overturn Roe v Wade, the 1973 landmark case protecting women's right to abortion, is a case in point.

And because what happens in America does not stay in America, there are fears the ruling is likely to [embolden anti-abortion movements worldwide, including in Europe](#).

Some modest headway in recognising the unrelenting tide of discrimination and violence facing women worldwide was made at last week's [largely self-congratulatory and mostly irrelevant G7 talk fest](#).

The group's mention of the many challenges and structural barriers facing women and the call for a gender-equal global economic recovery are a "step in the right direction", says the [Gender and Development Network](#).

The G7 did commit to ensuring women's sexual and reproductive health and rights.

But meeting only days after the US Supreme Court decision, neither US president Joe Biden nor any of the other six leaders — joined by the only woman participant, EU Commission president Ursula Von der Leyen — mentioned the right to abortion.

Even the tough-talking hard security-wired Nato summit, which had 11 women leaders in attendance, managed only a passing reference to the UN's under-implemented and under-funded Women, Peace and Security agenda and the Alliance's work to "incorporate gender perspectives across the organisation".

Let's be generous and say these are good beginnings.

But let's also be honest and say this is cursory, complacent lip service.

The onus is now on Indonesia as the current G20 chair to make sure that gender equality really gets the priority attention it deserves at the [summit in Bali in November](#).

The unnoticed 'care economy'

That means backing up noble intentions with real action on funding and investment in the [care economy](#), a commitment to ensure women's reproductive health and making sure that women do not bear the brunt of the looming global economic slowdown.

Escalating levels of global inequality are eroding fragile but hard-won gains on gender inequality and it is women — particularly those who face multiple and escalating forms of intersectionality — who have been hit hardest.

Even today, the pandemic continues to [impact women and girls disproportionately](#) and this will remain the case amid looming food insecurity, increased energy prices and high levels of inflation.

Russia's war in Ukraine means that Ukrainian women have now joined the ranks of millions more who have suffered the unrelenting human costs of armed conflict from [Syria to Yemen and Afghanistan](#) and far beyond.

Sexual violence as a tactic of war, terrorism and political repression is on the rise, [warns UN Women](#).

Afghan women and girls risk facing an even darker future unless there is a ["more concerted international effort"](#) to push the Taliban to respect women's rights.

To be effective, however, those putting the pressure on the Taliban must put their own houses in order.

Which brings us back to the damaging global fall-out of the US Supreme Court decision including concerns that it will [embolden anti-abortion movements](#) elsewhere.

Fearing just that, a group of MEPs has asked that anti-abortion lobbyists be banned from the European Parliament.

Metsola from Malta — where all abortion is illegal

European Parliament president Roberta Metsola, who is from Malta, is believed to have an [anti-abortion voting track record](#) and Malta is the only EU country where abortion is [not allowed under any circumstances](#).

Poland's government has adopted a [near-total ban on abortion](#) with limited exceptions in the cases of rape, incest, or danger to the mother's life.

And there is the unhappy fact that EU members [Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia](#) have [yet to ratify the Istanbul Convention](#), the first legally-binding international instrument on preventing and combating violence against women and girls at the international level.

The Polish government may withdraw from the agreement and despite widespread public protests and legal pushbacks, Turkey's Council of State [recently ruled to uphold](#) president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's decision to take Turkey out of the convention.

In contrast, [Ukraine has ratified the agreement](#) as part of its efforts to meet EU membership criteria.

There is no denying that advances in women's rights are being made by governments, international organisations, businesses and civil society actors.

But as recent events illustrate, there is much hard work ahead.

Ending [centuries of discrimination, deep-rooted patriarchy and misogyny](#) as well religious extremism and far-right populism which fuel the war on women requires counter-actions on multiple fronts.

Glib references and occasional mentions of gender equality in speeches and in long, rambling documents are not enough.

U.N. : Gender Parity in UN's Treaty Bodies: Challenges and Solutions

By Judge Aruna Devi Narain and Ms. Marcia Vaune Jocelyn Kran O.C.

Diplomat Magazine (03.04.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3v4VN2r> - Women have a right to participate in public and political life and the work of international organizations under the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This right extends to [membership in all UN bodies](#), including the 10 [treaty bodies](#) that are meant to help countries protect international human-rights obligations. Although the first committee was set up in 1977, gender equality has not been achieved in the membership of most of them.

These bodies monitor a country's compliance with the [UN human-rights treaties](#) that collectively cover civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights; the rights of women, people with disabilities, migrant workers and children; and the right to freedom from torture, disappearance and discrimination. The committees function separately from the Human Rights Council, and committee members are independent experts rather than national officials. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) acts as the secretariat for the committees, providing the staff that is needed to organize and support committee meetings, most of which are held in Geneva.

The committees establish frameworks for national policies, law and programs, ultimately affecting the everyday lives of their citizens, including women. Without an equal number of women experts on board, however, the treaty bodies are more likely to overlook critical issues and perspectives that should be part of their legal agenda.

In [June](#) 2021, the Human Rights Council considered a [report](#) exploring the impact of women's underrepresentation in UN bodies and mechanisms — including the treaty bodies — and the overall challenges to gender parity. The report flagged four treaty bodies with low numbers of women among their membership: the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers (14 percent); the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (28 percent); the Committee against Torture (30 percent); and the Committee on Enforced Disappearances (30 percent). The representation of women across all treaty bodies is 48.83 percent but concentrated in only four of the 10 committees. Two

of these address women's rights and children's rights: the CEDAW Committee and the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Currently, gender parity has been achieved only in the 18-member Committee, CRC.

One reason for the lack of gender parity in the treaty bodies is that countries have [not nominated](#) enough women as candidates for the committees. Countries that have ratified the relevant treaties nominate candidates and [elect members](#) for four-year terms at the UN in New York City. Sadly, most nomination processes are informal and lack transparency, resulting in qualified women candidates left unaware of such vacancies.

This [gender gap can be solved](#) by countries and the OHCHR taking the action recommended in the report to the Human Rights Council. For example, countries could identify women candidates for treaty body membership and, where appropriate, give women preference. They also could incorporate gender as an explicit feature in nomination processes, as was done in Canada's [call for application](#) for membership in the Committee of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. They could track their progress on these gender parity measures across the 10 committees.

While the nomination of more women candidates would be a step forward, we also need to ensure that countries vote for and elect such candidates. Elections during the Covid-19 pandemic have relied on virtual campaigns, and candidates now also reach out to civil society organizations to lobby their governments to vote for qualified women candidates. In addition, an informal group of former women chairs and members of treaty bodies could be set up to mentor women candidates and advise them on their campaigns. Countries that have adopted a feminist foreign policy, like Canada, France, Luxembourg, Mexico and Sweden, could also play a leading role in promoting women candidates.

OHCHR could advertise upcoming treaty body elections in women's networks, and track the number of women and men serving as independent experts, making this information public in a format similar to the [gender parity dashboard](#) used to measure staff composition in the UN Secretariat. It could also help countries design ways to achieve gender parity during the nomination and election processes.

We believe that High Commissioner for Human Rights, [Michelle Bachelet](#), is in a unique position to urge countries to take concerted action to push for gender parity in the treaty bodies. She could make a policy statement giving high priority to the achievement of gender equality in the committees and call for parity in nominations of candidates.

It is paradoxical that the [treaty bodies](#) entrusted with upholding the principle of non-discrimination based on sex use a process to select expert members that can result in discrimination. Now that the treaty bodies have been functioning for many years, it is long overdue for countries and the UN Secretariat to put their gender equality commitments into action.

Note: Thanks to Ms. Bhavya Mahajan, a lawyer and mediator from India, who helped with the research for the article.

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