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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner  
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the  
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

## **Annual full-day discussion on the human rights of women**

### **Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

#### *Summary*

In accordance with resolution 6/30, the Human Rights Council convened its annual full-day discussion on the human rights of women. The discussion was divided into two panels: the first focused on the theme “Violence against women in the world of work” and the second discussed the theme “The rights of older women and their economic empowerment”.



## **I. Introduction**

1. On 27 and 28 June 2019, the Human Rights Council, pursuant to its resolution 6/30, convened its annual full-day discussion on the human rights of women. The discussion was divided into two panels: the first focused on the theme “Violence against women in the world of work”; the second focused on the theme “The rights of older women and their economic empowerment”.
2. The webcast of the panel discussions is archived and can be reviewed at <http://webtv.un.org>.

## **II. Violence against women in the world of work**

3. The first panel discussion was opened by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Prime Minister of Iceland, Katrín Jakobsdóttir, and moderated by the Chair of the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises, Surya Deva. The panellists were Maria-Luz Vega, Coordinator of the Future of Work Initiative at the International Labour Organization (ILO), Dubravka Šimonović, Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, and Novelita Valdez Palisoc, Regional Representative for Asia in the International Domestic Workers Federation and National President of United Domestic Workers of the Philippines.

### **A. Opening statements**

4. In her opening remarks, the High Commissioner welcomed the adoption of the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190). She emphasized that the new Convention sought to establish an integrated and gender-responsive approach to ending violence and harassment against women workers, regardless of their contractual status; it tackled underlying causes and risk factors, including gender stereotypes, discrimination and unequal gender-based power relations; and it acknowledged the impact of domestic violence on workers.

5. She underscored the impact of violence against women in the world of work, both against women and girls themselves, as well as against society. She emphasized that behaviours and practices which resulted in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm to women and girls damaged their physical and mental health and harmed the likelihood that they would enter into, or remain in, the labour market. Furthermore, she noted that the failure to pursue career development led many women and girls to be trapped in economic insecurity, unable to generate income or access social protections.

6. She reminded the meeting that hindering women’s participation in the labour market was a great loss, as women’s participation in the global economy could add up to \$12 trillion in growth in gross domestic product by 2025. She also pointed out women’s crucial role in poverty reduction. She cited research in which the World Bank had found that in Latin America and the Caribbean, female labour market income had contributed to a 30 per cent reduction in extreme poverty over a 10-year period. In that regard, she emphasized that the elimination of violence against women in the world of work was in the interest of every State, every business, every factory, every community, every family and every individual. She stressed that the impact on the rights and freedoms of the individuals concerned was severe and that damage was also being done to productivity, business revenues and the growth and sustainability of national economies.

7. She emphasized that gender-based violence against women in the world of work was rooted in structural and pervasive gender-based stereotypes and discrimination, and that a culture of impunity and the failure to ensure equal access to justice for women and girls contributed to exposing them to higher risks of violence and abuse. She noted that multiple forms of discrimination against women and girls were often pushing women to do jobs in informal and precarious occupations with higher risks of exposure to gender-based violence, such as agriculture, labour-intensive manufacturing, hotels, restaurants, retail, domestic work and public services, such as transport and health care.

8. While acknowledging the efforts made by countries to prevent and respond to violence in the world of work, the High Commissioner recalled the gap in current responses. She pointed out that legislation often did not cover the full spectrum of work, missing out women and girls working in less protected areas, such as domestic workers, including migrant domestic workers, and others working in the informal sector. Referring to the impact of actual and perceived risk of stigma, revictimization and reprisals that prevented victims and survivors from speaking out, she emphasized the need to guarantee access to justice and effective remedies for women and girls who faced violence and harassment in the workplace. She called not only on States but also on companies, social partners and trade unions to take measures to prevent violence against women in the workplace.

9. In conclusion, she underlined the importance of the newly adopted ILO Convention No. 190 and the centrality of ILO efforts in promoting the rights of women at the forefront of labour rights, and welcomed the fact that the Human Rights Council was giving consideration to this topic.

10. In her opening statement, the Prime Minister of Iceland emphasized that the commitment to gender equality was established in the Charter of the United Nations but the commitment had not yet been fulfilled. She noted that the first World Conference of the International Women's Year in Mexico in 1975 led to the first World Plan of Action and that the Beijing Platform for Action of 1995 had played a decisive role in setting the path towards gender equality.

11. She noted that in Iceland in 1975, more than 25,000 women had taken part in a one-day women's strike to emphasize the importance of their contribution to the economy, both in paid and unpaid work. She stated that currently nearly 80 per cent of Icelandic women were active in the paid labour force and their contribution had been decisive in the economic growth and development of the country. She noted that Iceland had ranked at the top of the Global Gender Gap Index of the World Economic Forum for 10 consecutive years.

12. She acknowledged that the advancement of human rights had never followed a linear path and expressed concern over backlashes, such as the recurrent denial of women's reproductive freedom, the repoliticization of women's bodies, sexist hate speech, misogyny and online violence, as well as the backlashes against the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer plus persons. She observed that the #MeToo movement continued to expose the systematic harassment of and violence and everyday sexism used against women. She emphasized that the #MeToo movement had explosive power and demanded structural solutions and accountability by employers, unions, authorities and perpetrators. She acknowledged that the movement had achieved social recognition and public awareness of the prevalence of sexual harassment and violence and pushed Governments, educational institutions and employers to deal with this problem at its true scale.

13. The Prime Minister then called on Governments and international organizations to facilitate societal change and to lead the way, rather than slow down or deter such change. She further stressed that sexist structures could only be dismantled through a large movement and called for solidarity to "push back the pushback" against gender equality and universal human rights. She also pledged early ratification of ILO Convention No. 190 by Iceland.

14. In conclusion, she appealed to the audience to take maximum advantage of the ongoing global Beijing + 25 review and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as an opportunity to strengthen political efforts for the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

## **B. Overview of presentations**

15. The moderator, Mr. Deva, introduced the panellists. He drew the attention of the audience to the fact that the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises had issued a report on the gender dimensions of the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (A/HRC/41/43). In the report, the Working Group suggested that States and business enterprises should take the following actions to tackle violence against women in the world of work: (a) address the root causes

and bring systemic changes to patriarchal power structures, social norms and gender stereotypes; (b) have more women in senior positions and provide managerial staff with gender-sensitive training; (c) understand the gendered impact of violence against women and the intersectional nature of the discrimination they face; (d) use sex-disaggregated data, engage gender-sensitive experts and consult women's organizations and women human rights defenders when conducting human rights due diligence; (e) support women workers in forming trade unions and taking up leadership positions in the unions; (f) recognize violence in the world of work as a severe and often irremediable human rights risk and adopt zero tolerance for such an impact throughout their operations; and (g) ensure women's access to gender-transformative remedies.

16. Ms. Vega introduced ILO Convention No. 190 and Recommendation No. 206, which were adopted by the International Labour Conference on 21 June 2019. She noted that they aimed to prevent, identify and redress violence and harassment in the world of work, including gender-based violence and the effects of domestic violence, which was not only damaging to individuals but also to the working environment, productivity and business reputation. She went on to emphasize that the two instruments represented a recognition that violence and harassment in the world of work could constitute a human rights violation or abuse, and that the scope of their application covered all workers in all sectors, both public and private, and including the formal and informal economy. The instruments deepened the work of the ILO on social justice and laid the grounds for the construction of a human-centred model of society.

17. Ms. Šimonović highlighted the complementarity of the newly adopted ILO Convention No. 190 and the existing international framework on the elimination of violence against women in the world of work. She stressed that it would be important that the new Convention be implemented together with other existing instruments and mechanisms, such as the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and its Optional Protocol, the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, general recommendation No. 35 (2017) of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on gender-based violence against women and regional international treaties, such as the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women (Convention of Belem do Para), the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol). Acknowledging that violence against women persisted, despite the evolution of international frameworks, Ms. Šimonović stressed that it was time to shift from proclamation to the realization of zero tolerance of violence and harassment in the world of work.

18. Ms. Valdez Palisoc illustrated the challenges faced by domestic workers, based on her own experience, and underscored the important role of trade unions in giving voice to workers. As a domestic worker, she had faced exploitation, denial of access to social security, violence and harassment, including sexual violence. Despite these abuses, she had kept silent, as she did not know what rights she had as a domestic worker or how to express grievances until she joined a trade union. She underlined the important role of trade unions in raising awareness and building the capacity of workers to find their voice, protect their rights and enable workers to participate in decision-making, including at the international level, such as the development and adoption of ILO conventions. As examples of the work of trade unions in that regard, she mentioned that as a member of the International Domestic Workers Federation, she was supporting the full implementation of the Kasambahay Law protecting the rights of domestic workers in the Philippines<sup>1</sup> and the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189).

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<sup>1</sup> Republic Act No. 10361 of the Philippines, available from [www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2013/01/18/republic-act-no-10361/](http://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2013/01/18/republic-act-no-10361/).

### C. Statements by representatives of States and observers

19. Speakers from the floor welcomed the adoption of ILO Convention No. 190 and Recommendation No. 206. Some emphasized the importance and relevance of the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights in eliminating violence and harassment against women in the world of work. Speakers emphasized the importance of taking a holistic approach to the prevention and elimination of such violence; recognizing the scope of violence and harassment in the world of work beyond those occurring in the physical workplace; establishing strong accountability mechanisms; effectively implementing laws and policies to protect labour rights; guaranteeing access to justice for survivors; engaging both women and men as agents for change; addressing the negative impact of digital technologies that is reinforcing and normalizing discriminatory gender stereotypes, misogyny, marginalization and violence against women; and paying particular attention to the heightened risks faced by workers in the informal sector, including migrant domestic workers. The importance of pushing back the current pushback against gender equality was also underscored. Calls were made to business enterprises to adopt a gender-transformative approach to violence and harassment and establish a gender-sensitive code of conduct with adequate training and confidential redress procedures.

20. Speakers pointed to the efforts made in relation to the elimination of violence and harassment against women in the world of work in their countries or regions. The European Trade Union Confederation had developed strategies to prevent, manage and eliminate workplace harassment and violence against women.<sup>2</sup> The member States of the Caribbean Community had drafted a model bill on protection against sexual harassment.<sup>3</sup> Member States of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations were working with ILO, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and the European Union to implement the “Safe and fair” programme, aimed at preventing and combating violence against women migrant workers in the region.<sup>4</sup>

21. Speakers reported on national laws and policies adopted or amended to combat violence against and harassment of women in the workplace. Some countries had enacted laws to recognize financial entitlements for workers facing violence and harassment at work, including allowing paid leave or retaining their employment while they dealt with such violence. One speaker mentioned confidential counselling and informal dispute resolution, while safeguarding access to the formal justice system, as elements to eliminate gender-based violence in the workplace. Other speakers referred to efforts at the national level to create mechanisms or institutions, such as women’s committees in trade unions or a national committee on women mandated to protect the rights of women.

22. Speakers presented tools and research to address violence and harassment in the world of work, such as a handbook compiling lessons learned and emerging good practices to address violence against women in the world of work, developed jointly by UN-Women and ILO.<sup>5</sup> The International Development Law Organization had conducted research on women working in the justice system and found that such women, including women judges and prosecutors, also faced gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace.

23. Speakers actively raised questions on how to eliminate violence and harassment against women in the world of work and sought the views of the panellists on how to protect and build the capacity of women facing intersecting forms of discrimination, such as young women, domestic workers and women working in the informal sector; effective measures for awareness-raising, including for young women; how to protect women in public work; how to address underlying factors within institutional and work cultures to prevent violence and harassment; how to create a space where both men and women could speak up against violence and harassment; the roles of United Nations country teams and other intergovernmental organizations in providing technical cooperation and capacity-building to combat violence and harassment; the roles of global, regional, national,

<sup>2</sup> See *Safe at Home. Safe at Work* (May 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Available from [www.law.cornell.edu/sites/www.law.cornell.edu/files/women-and-justice/CARICOM-Model-Legislation-on-Sexual-Harassment.pdf](http://www.law.cornell.edu/sites/www.law.cornell.edu/files/women-and-justice/CARICOM-Model-Legislation-on-Sexual-Harassment.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> See [www.ilo.org/asia/projects/WCMS\\_632458/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/asia/projects/WCMS_632458/lang--en/index.htm).

<sup>5</sup> See *Addressing Violence and Harassment against Women in the World of Work* (2019).

subnational and local actors in combating violence and harassment; how employers could break the cycle of violence by supporting the rehabilitation of perpetrators; how to eliminate impunity for perpetrators and ensure access to justice for survivors; and strategies and measures applicable to the least developed countries and small island developing countries.

#### **D. Responses of panellists and concluding remarks**

24. In her response to the discussion from the floor, the Prime Minister of Iceland underscored three key messages. First, the persisting reality that only 50 per cent of women globally were participating in the formal workforce was unacceptable. One of the key elements for such inequality was gender-based violence against and harassment of women. That was a structural problem requiring structural solutions. Secondly, the responsibility to find structural solutions lay with Governments, employers and trade unions, not with individual women. Thirdly, realizing gender equality in the workplace was not only the right thing to do but also an economically sound strategy. For example, the economic strength of Iceland was based on the equal participation of men and women in economic activities. The Prime Minister emphasized that realizing gender equality in economic participation led to a better society, not only for women but also for men. In conclusion, noting that 2020 was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, she urged everyone to step up actions to advance gender equality and not leave it for another 25 years to be realized.

25. The moderator summarized the five broad themes raised in the interventions from the floor, namely: (a) what the good practices to eliminate gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work were; (b) what role technical assistance and cooperation, awareness-raising and capacity-building could play in such efforts; (c) how men could be engaged in the initiatives to eliminate violence and harassment in the world of work; (d) what the role of employers was in the prevention of violence and harassment in the world of work, including in the informal sector and the private sphere; and (e) what effective accountability measures were.

26. Ms. Vega welcomed the expressions of support for ILO Convention No. 190 and Recommendation No. 206. She encouraged all actors to read thoroughly the Convention and the Recommendation, which provided guidance on how to eliminate violence and harassment in the world of work. For example, article 9 of the Convention gave detailed guidance on the role employers could play in such efforts. She emphasized that the ILO was committed to facilitating the identification of good practices, supporting developing strategies and implementing instruments through social dialogue. In conclusion, she called on States to ratify the newly adopted Convention.

27. Ms. Šimonović emphasized the importance of the mandates of the independent global and regional human rights mechanisms mandated to work on gender-based violence against women and the need to strengthen their function. She pointed out, for example, that during the elaboration of ILO Convention No. 190, the platform of independent United Nations and regional expert mechanisms on violence against women and on women's rights<sup>6</sup> had issued a joint statement, in which they urged the negotiating States to respect and safeguard existing international legal standards protecting women's rights, including those recognizing sexual harassment as a human rights violation, and to align the new ILO Convention with such standards.<sup>7</sup> In conclusion, she called upon all States to ratify ILO Convention No. 190, implement it in conjunction with other existing international and

<sup>6</sup> The platform is composed of seven mandates: the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences; the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women; the Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice; the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence of the Council of Europe; the Rapporteur on the Rights of Women of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights; the Special Rapporteur on Women's Rights in Africa; and the Committee of Experts of the Follow-up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention.

<sup>7</sup> See [www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/SR/StatementILO\\_31May2019.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/SR/StatementILO_31May2019.pdf).

regional human rights instruments and align national legislation with the Convention and other international instruments.

28. Ms. Valdez Palisoc provided illustrative examples and actions that could be taken by global, regional, national and local trade unions. For example, the United Domestic Workers of the Philippines had established a gender committee and developed strategies for facilitating the ratification of relevant ILO Conventions by the State. She seconded Ms. Vega and encouraged all actors to familiarize themselves with the provisions of ILO Convention No 190 and Recommendation No. 206, which gave detailed guidance on how to eliminate violence and harassment in the world of work.

29. Complementing responses to questions from the floor on good practices, the moderator pointed out that the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises was compiling a list of good practices for applying gender lenses to the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and that the compilation would be made available on the website of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. He highlighted three key elements of the efforts to eliminate violence and harassment in the world of work, identified in the course of compiling good practices. First, making business activities gender-responsive required changes in mindset; it could not be simply another box to tick, but required fundamental structural transformation. Second, the internal grievance mechanisms of business enterprises needed to take complaints on gender-based violence and harassment seriously; gender sensitivity of members of such grievance mechanisms was necessary. Thirdly, more women should play central roles in trade unions.

### **III. The rights of older women and their economic empowerment**

30. The second panel discussion was also opened by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The panel was moderated by Mónica Ferro, Director of the United Nations Population Fund Office in Geneva. The panel comprised Idah Nambeya, Senior Adviser to the “Grandmothers to Grandmothers” campaign at the Stephen Lewis Foundation; Andrew Byrnes, Professor of International Law at the University of New South Wales, Australia; and Marion Bethel, member of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

#### **A. Opening statement by the High Commissioner for Human Rights**

31. In her opening remarks, the High Commissioner reiterated that the global ageing of societies should be celebrated, since it demonstrated that people could live and contribute to society for longer. She cited the most recent World Population Prospects report, in which it was estimated that by 2050 1 in 6 people would be over the age of 65, which was up from 1 in 11 in 2019. However, she explained that despite these facts, the rights of older persons, and particularly older women, were being profoundly neglected by policymakers and even the human rights community. She therefore applauded the panel discussion as an important opportunity to give due recognition to the rights and contributions of older women.

32. The High Commissioner pointed out that older women were contributing to societies in a myriad of roles. She noted that almost a quarter of women over the age of 60 were working, many in farming and primarily in the informal sector. In sub-Saharan Africa, as many as 42 per cent of women aged over 65 participated in the labour force. Furthermore, many older women were engaged in unpaid domestic and care work, which often involved childcare and also the care of older persons. She gave the example of Japan, where data from 2016 indicated that almost 70 per cent of the women who provided care for older members of the family were themselves over the age of 60. While these jobs were not being accounted for in the formal economy, many societies would barely function without them.

33. The High Commissioner indicated that in spite of those important roles, older women faced not only the burden of age discrimination but also the consequences of deep, wide-ranging and lifelong gender discrimination, culminating in an old age that was likely to be destitute, isolated and vulnerable to abuse. As older women had been excluded from education, vocational training or formal work opportunities throughout their life, they would ultimately not benefit from social protections such as pensions. Moreover, she

explained that discriminatory laws could mean that women did not own land or their home and were likely to have very restricted or no access to financial credit and property.

34. The High Commissioner concluded that protecting the rights of older women involved protecting the rights of all women and girls and eliminating discrimination against women and girls in education, at work, in the family and in the public sphere. She mentioned the need to improve access to gainful work and lifelong learning, and the importance of fighting for equality in marriage, family, property rights, legal capacity and gender roles. Furthermore, discrimination related to pay equity, pregnancy or childcare and gender-based violence and harassment should be eradicated. Women's and girls' enjoyment of sexual and reproductive health and rights must be promoted and protected, and social protection systems should be adopted. She also insisted on the importance of public support for care services, which protected the rights of those needing care and those providing care, and of combating ageism and prejudice against older women and men.

## **B. Overview of presentations**

35. Ms. Ferro, said the panel discussion was critical and timely. She stated that population ageing should be celebrated, all the while also acknowledging and eradicating the accumulated discrimination faced by older women. She pointed out that there was a high risk that older women would end up in poverty owing to lifelong discrimination and oppressive patriarchal structures. She emphasized that the contribution of older women was indispensable to societies, yet was often overlooked and remained invisible. Worse, older women were often seen as an economic burden.

36. Ms. Nambeya began by stressing that African grandmothers were at the heart of the response to the AIDS pandemic: they had stepped in to care for more than 15 million children orphaned by AIDS. She mentioned that the "Grandmothers to Grandmothers" campaign was a dynamic global movement of solidarity to raise awareness and funds in support of African grandmothers. Grandmothers experienced a depletion of their resources in an economic, emotional and physical way because of the challenges they faced in supporting orphans and vulnerable children. She explained that to counter these challenges, innovative savings and income-generating activities were being developed, building a movement to ensure that government policies, programmes and strategies integrated the needs and rights of the grandmothers, including income security, pensions and grants, land and inheritance rights, eliminating violence against women and improving access to health care. The grandmothers were seeking protection of their rights and were leading a movement for justice.

37. Mr. Byrnes stated that while progress had been made by the United Nations human rights mechanisms, apart from the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women the attention paid to the rights of older women had been limited. He underscored the importance of an age perspective, as widespread ageism and a denial of the rights of older people continued to exist. To address this effectively, he proposed adding an independent, comprehensive and coherent age-based rights framework to the existing human rights system, such as a specifically formulated treaty on the rights of older persons. Such a treaty would incorporate detailed binding obligations such as, for example, a right to palliative care services, the right to further education or (re)training, the right to be free from abuse and the right to exercise legal capacity. It could also permit a coherent and holistic approach to the realization of existing rights, such as to fair, non-discriminatory and integrated social security and protection, requiring Governments to take into consideration the monetary and non-monetary contributions of older women to pensions and other social security systems. He pointed out that a new treaty would have a transformative potential, as the other group-focused treaties had had and would allow for a more coherent and holistic approach to ageism, which lay at the core of discrimination against older people.

38. Ms. Bethel emphasized that the economic empowerment and quality of life of older women was dependent on the earlier phases and stages of their life cycle. She noted that economic and social rights had a particular significance for older women and highlighted the importance of general recommendation No. 27 (2010) of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on older women and the protection of their human rights. In general recommendation No. 27, the Committee had acknowledged the significance of taking a life-cycle approach to the full development and advancement of



women. Ms. Bethel stated that substantive equality, non-discrimination and State obligations were the pillars of older women's economic and social rights. She urged States to repeal discriminatory laws, enact laws that protected the rights of older women and ensure that other laws did not result in indirect discrimination, thus looking at the actual and lived experiences of equality of older women. For example, she insisted on an obligation for States to provide a support system, including free microcredit and affordable transportation to enable older women to participate in economic and social life. She concluded that economic independence empowered women at all stages of their lives to make decisions concerning maternity, marriage and participation in public life.

### **C. Statements by representatives of States and observers**

39. During the dialogue, speakers reiterated that population ageing was one of the most significant global phenomena of the twenty-first century and a challenge that societies must urgently face. While older women constituted an invaluable asset to society at all levels and played a vital role in all aspects of the social and economic development of States, they faced multiple challenges, discrimination and abuse on a daily basis and were often overlooked in national and international legislation, leading to a limited and fragmented response to the enjoyment of their human rights. In that context, speakers asked what could be done to increase the visibility of the issues that older women faced and what specific role technical cooperation and capacity-building could play in enhancing and sustaining the substantial economic activity of older persons in many sectors, including through the provision of lifelong skills.

40. Speakers acknowledged that to eradicate discrimination and abuse against older women, all discrimination against women and girls, beginning early and continuing throughout the life cycle, should be addressed. They agreed that when discrimination based on age and gender intersected, they produced forms of discrimination that uniquely disadvantaged older women. Age discrimination was still legal in many countries; age limits on education and training reduced the employability of older women; mandatory retirement ages excluded them from the workforce; and age limits on financial services limited their financial independence. Speakers underscored the importance of social protection systems, including pensions, to support the realization of the rights of older people and pointed out that contributory pension systems tended to exacerbate gender inequality, homelessness and poverty for women. They asked the panel how the pay gap in pensions could be reduced in the coming years and decades, and to share best practices in terms of adequate non-contributory pensions for women in order to ensure income security.

41. Speakers noted that the debate was ongoing as to whether to adopt a new international instrument or to make better use of the existing instruments. Many urged the former option so as to clearly define the normative elements of the rights of older persons and outline the duties of States to ensure older women's equal access to education and employment opportunities; reduce the unfair burden of unpaid caregiving and domestic work borne by older women; and enable healthy ageing for older women through supportive and gender-sensitive institutions. Some speakers insisted on the need for a comprehensive transformation and fundamental redistribution of work to address generation and gender gaps, including by providing public services, social protection and a basic infrastructure, and by promoting the sharing of domestic and care work between men and women. Speakers called for developing intergenerational solidarity and community life as a means for the economic and social empowerment of older women.

### **D. Responses by panellists and concluding remarks**

42. In her concluding remarks, Ms. Nambeya emphasized that the first thing that needed to be done was to acknowledge the existence of grandmothers and older persons in general. She explained that during the AIDS epidemic, nobody knew they were there, they were not accounted for and were stigmatized instead. On capacity-building, she stressed that all education and skills development that was considered relevant for young people should also be considered relevant for older people: the grandmothers wanted to go to school, to learn new skills, for example on how to communicate effectively or how to raise funds. She

concluded that discrimination against and stigmatization of older people must be eliminated and older women should be included, respected, protected and accounted for.

43. Mr. Byrnes stressed that the rights discussed at the panel were linked to broader notions than economic empowerment, such as women's political participation and representation. On pensions and social support, including a universal social pension, he highlighted certain interlinked issues that should be addressed, such as the fairness of tax systems and laws, the way in which current pension contributions were seen and the basis of eligibility for pensions, bearing in mind that a link to paid employment was fundamentally discriminatory to women. He also noted the current gaps in data and statistics, and the need for these issues to be looked at from different perspectives through national action plans and policies, including gender and age. He concluded that to strengthen older women's rights, reporting to the existing United Nations human rights treaty bodies remained important, as was ensuring that those bodies had sufficient time and resources and the development of new ways for States to focus on the rights of older women.

44. Ms. Bethel agreed that it was important to make grandmothers more visible and that the pension issue was crucial. She believed that, thus far, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women was the appropriate mechanism to address the rights of older women, with information received through national reports and shadow reports. She underscored the importance, both for States and for civil society, of highlighting the issue of older women and providing specificity from the national perspective so that the Committee could better respond to and focus on the issue. She emphasized that civil society organizations could forward specific issues to the Committee, as well as being present during the hearing, and that the Committee would appreciate hearing about the whole complexity of the lives and life cycle of older women. With regard to national action plans and policies, she reiterated that they should address the rights of older women holistically and through a human rights-based and life-cycle approach. To conclude, she emphasized the importance of looking at transformative equality and the lived experiences of older women, which went beyond a strictly legal approach and included literacy, education and economic empowerment.

45. Ms. Ferro summarized the conversation, which had focused on discrimination but also empowerment. She reiterated that work was needed, both on substantive topics, such as a life-cycle approach, education, employment and political empowerment, but also in regard to programming, implementing and monitoring. A gender lens should be applied to all the work being done and more data was necessary to adequately foresee and address issues. She concluded the panel discussion with a call to action to "finish the unfinished business": everything that was needed for action was known, all that was left was to deliver for women and for the girls who would one day be adults and older women.

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