

STAFFCOUNCIL



**Statement of
Vesna Markovic Dasovic, Chair
UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS/UN WOMEN
Staff Council
First regular session of the
UN Women Executive Board
14-15 February 2022**

Madame President [H.E. Ms. Rabab Fatima, PR of Bangladesh],

Distinguished Members of the Executive Board,

Dear Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure, as the Chair of the UNDP, UNFPA, UNOPS and UN Women Staff Council to address the Board today.

Please allow me to start by expressing my deepest sympathy and condolences to you and our UN Women colleagues and their families that have lost loved ones in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thank you for the opportunity to deliver this statement today.

This Council, together with about **110 country and regional level staff associations**, is fully committed to a strong UNDP, UNFPA, UNOPS and UN Women and to the wellbeing of **all personnel**, full time staff members as well as colleagues on all other types of contracts.

Our goal is a healthy workforce in a workplace that provides equal opportunities and ensures dignity and rights for all.

UN Women, like the rest of the UN system and all institutions and organizations the world over, faced myriad challenges in the constantly changing landscape of the past two years, not least due to COVID-19. We wish to express our deep appreciation and gratitude to UN Women's senior leadership for making personnel's **wellbeing THE priority** and for engaging with personnel to minimize the impacts – as we witnessed an admirable and strong sense of belonging to One UN family.

UN Women personnel should **feel safe and supported** wherever they work from – their offices or homes – and be recognized, valued and have a sense of belonging. The pandemic has forced us to think ahead and imagine a “new normal.” There are still more questions than answers at this point. We hear from our colleagues that more needs to be done to respond to the changed reality of what work means. As the Staff Council, we engage in the conversations on the future of work with personnel, our agencies' leadership and the UN system at large. We are encouraged by the flexible approaches that the agencies, including UN Women who have been leading from the front, have taken since the beginning of the pandemic and their consistent and open information sharing with personnel. This needs to continue in order to keep the channels of communication open and the messaging clear and easy to understand.

We congratulate UN Women on its new Strategic Plan. We welcome the focus on an empowered workforce to deliver results and note that this promise needs to be fulfilled by continuous investment and engagement and the delivery of results.

Moving ahead, the following areas require ongoing and additional engagement in line with the UN's commitment to decent work standards.

First: Conditions of service, job security and equal opportunities

Our people are our biggest asset and we must keep people at the centre of our vision and strategy. This means that we need to focus on removing all kinds of inequalities in our workforce, including inequalities between people that are in UN language called staff and people that are called “non-staff”. This requires additional investments of financial resources to ensure that all our personnel are hired based on the UN principle of decent work so that they can deliver the expected results.

UN Women has a combined work force of about 3,500 personnel, of which only a third, about 1220 colleagues, are staff as per the ICSC regulations. We are talking about 2/3 of the agency's workforce that is directly affected here.

We recognize that the current trends and nature of funding impacts the agencies' ability to issue staff contracts (temporary, continuing, and fixed term) and that the impact of it on the existing contractual framework and the future of work is not clear. We also recognize our agencies' efforts to address the shortfalls and a long history of abuse of “non-staff” contract modalities. However, we remain concerned about the potential attrition and turnover in personnel and the vulnerabilities related to existing contractual modalities. Delivery rates expected of UN Women require a strong dedicated workforce, with equal opportunities and equal pay for equal work when staff and other personnel perform the same jobs. We now have staff and so called “non staff” working side by side performing the same job with different levels of salaries /fees, benefits, and entitlements due to the nature of funding sources or lack of funding. Our reality is that we have a two- or even three-tier class system of personnel in UN Women and the UN system more broadly. This is unacceptable for the United Nations. We know also, that in the case of non-staff contracts, women are at a disadvantage as the research tells us they negotiate far less favorable contracts.

We represent staff and personnel from all UN Women, UNDP, UNFPA and UNOPS in the UNISERV Federation and we share concerns about lack of a “One UN” approach with regard to **hiring and retaining people**. We continuously urge for harmonization of the use of contract modalities, which will provide equal opportunities and support interagency mobility. Given that UN Women has no continuous contracts, issuing five year-Fixed Term Appointments (FTA) contracts would be a good way forward.

We recognize the need for the organization to remain flexible and agile and meet the expectations and to adjust to deliver in a complex and constantly changing peacebuilding, humanitarian, and development reality. We recognize the importance of **change management processes** (whether light reviews, realignments, restructuring, pivots to the field) to meet the evolving needs of our development context. Ensuring the transparent and timely involvement of the Staff Council and Local Staff Associations in those processes significantly improves trust.

I wish to note here that the issue of different contract types poses a particular challenge for our personnel not on staff contracts when change management processes are launched. Some of them have been under Service or Individual Consultancy Contracts for years, if not decades, but are not considered what we call “internal” candidates in realignment and change processes. This is deeply unfair and needs to change.

As the Staff Council, we also face challenges in providing support to colleagues on less favourable contract types as their access to the agencies' informal or formal justice system is limited or nonexistent.

We note that more needs to be done by UN Women to eradicate disparities in recruitments both locally and internationally – we can significantly improve, for example, racial and ethnic diversity and geographic representation, as well as representation of persons with disabilities and LGBTQI people. Commitment to the principle of leaving no one behind should start at home. We also need to invest more in ensuring career progression for General Service Staff into Professional roles. This should be done not just at the hiring stage, but using a talent management approach that grooms our General Service staff and younger professionals for upward progression at UN Women.

We call on you our Executive Board, both as funders and our governance mechanism, to work in all the fora that you have influence in to ensure that we move towards the **eradication of this class system** and towards **transparent and inclusive hiring practices that ensure equal opportunities and decent work conditions for all at UN Women**.

Second: Work Life Balance and Mental Health

Working in the UN has always been a mix of exhilarating, meaningful and stressful work. The COVID 19 pandemic increased the mental health issues and there is still more to be done to improve the organizational culture for personnel, including addressing stigma, preventing suicide, and addressing fear of the unknown and uncertainty.

We are particularly concerned about access to vaccines for our colleagues in duty stations with weak health systems. People's resilience has been commendable as colleagues have had to deal with many issues. These include how to care for children with the unpredictable schedules of childcare facilities and schools. How to care for adults with health conditions when the healthcare system is overwhelmed? How to deal with the sense of isolation when work and social life blend into one long Zoom session?

A significant number of actions, measures, resources and tools have been put in place to provide support to personnel during the pandemic. We have worked with UN Women's management for coordinated support to be delivered to our colleagues in many countries affected by the lack of medical services, local currency devaluations and economic crises, natural disasters, and conflict – all in service of our personnel and their family's safety and security. As large numbers of our personnel are burned out and face great hardships, we can't stress enough the importance of **continuous dialogue** to support shared responsibility and shared accountability. We urge the **management at all levels** to exercise a maximum flexibility approach to achieve work-life balance. We welcome the "UN System Model Policy on Flexible Work" adopted by the CEB which strengthens the use of flexible work arrangements, and which no longer ask that personnel provide reasons for their requests. We will continue dialogue with Human Resources at UN Women to translate this model policy into concrete measures.

We recognize that not all managers have the same expectations from their teams, and we urge for a unified people-centered approach in dealing with individual situations – one that applies certain standards across the board, but one also that takes into account individual vulnerabilities. For working parents and caregivers, flexible work arrangements and work-life balance is not a matter

of benevolence, it is about surviving and managing this crisis; it is about **sustainability of the work force, optimal talent management and promoting positive long-term health impacts**. It is also about our rights.

I would like here to expand on something I alluded to earlier in my statement – the future of work. Colleagues remain preoccupied and anxious about what a workplace will look like. How will this affect the principle of equal rights and opportunities? How will this affect workplace relationships and will senior managers be trained to manage for a hybrid workplace? Best practices and lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis must serve to bring personnel and management closer in a shared understanding of and collective commitment to individual and organizational responsibilities for personnel wellbeing and Duty of Care.

The 2021 Work Trend Index recently outlined findings from a study that involved over 30K people in 31 countries and that analysed trillions of productivity and labour signals across Microsoft and LinkedIn.

- Their #1 finding: Flexible work is here to stay, post-pandemic workspaces need to be extremely flexible and hybrid, to succeed
- Another finding: High productivity is masking an exhausted workforce, globally. While employee productivity remained the same or higher, data shows 54% feel overworked, 39% exhausted, and digital exhaustion is a real thing

We are not immune to these trends. But there are always opportunities in crises. Industry leaders are calling for bringing authenticity to company cultures. They are saying we must build a workplace based on trust. They are saying, facilitate connections so that people can create and innovate and better relate to each other. They are saying, expect hybrid work models, create a plan to empower people for maximum flexibility. Ask your employees how they are doing and what they need, to deliver the results to which we all utterly committed. **Transparency, honest and open and honest dialogue, demonstrated commitment to the founding values of the UN and shared accountability are essential to thrive in the new world of work.**

All this points to the **need for skilled leadership** – within UN Women and among Member States – to deal with the tough question: Do we sharpen our focus, leveraging our comparative advantages, and re- and de-prioritise deliverables or do we sit by and watch good people look for better opportunities and leave UN Women?

Third: Anti - racism and discrimination

On the important subject of **anti-racism and non-discrimination** – we welcome and fully support UN Women’s commitment to this cause and appreciate the ongoing work. **We commend UNOPS for having included Dr. Martin Luther King Day as flexible work holiday in New York and urge UN Women to do the same.** We remain committed to supporting personnel and management in engaging in difficult conversations. However, racism is a long-term systemic issue that requires ongoing dialogue and education, but also concrete measures to deal with discriminatory and abusive practices, special measures to address past failures and injustices in terms of recruitment, access to opportunities, performance evaluations and promotions. It also requires courage to speak out and to listen to what may be uncomfortable truths for others. More needs to be done to foster such a culture and it should include improving policies, creating better processes for accountability, better measures to protect UN Women colleagues from retaliation, which some

personnel still fear. We understand this is long-term work – so we need to see short-term results and plans for medium- to long-term results.

Conclusion

Finally, we note that the role of Staff Council Representatives is more crucial than ever in today's challenging and stressful times. We have seen the huge demand for the work of the Staff Council. **UN Women is the only agency among the four agencies that comprise the UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS/UN Women Staff Council that does not** release a Representative full time or at least part time to serve personnel. We note that this is unsustainable and call for UN Women, in advance of the forthcoming Staff Council elections to announce the full time release of at least one staff/personnel representative to advocate for the rights of personnel both within UN Women and in multiple fora across the UN system.

We are living through multiple crises as the Secretary-General just told the General Assembly.

Madame President, thank you for the opportunity to address the Executive Board. UN Women personnel and we, as their representatives, count on your support as we all aim for a more equal, just and sustainable future for all.

I welcome your feedback and comments.

Thank you.