

Statement by

UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS/UN Women Staff Council

First regular session of the UN Women Executive Board

15 - 16 February 2021

Mr. President,

Distinguished Members of the Executive Board,

Dear Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to address you today as the First Vice Chair of the UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS/UN Women Staff Council.

Please allow me to start by expressing my deepest sympathies and condolences to colleagues and families that have lost their loved ones as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This Council, together with about **80 country and regional staff associations**, is fully committed to a strong UNDP, UNFPA, UNOPS and UN Women and to the rights, dignity and wellbeing of **all our personnel**.

The year 2020 was a year like no other. The losses, fear, stress and challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic, rising insecurities, and socio-economic fallouts brought last year, carries over to 2021. But last year also showed us the sheer possibilities, determination and solidarity that we as the UN family bring. The pandemic may have physically kept us distant, but the unprecedented crisis brought our senior management and Staff Council Representatives together to act in unison for the well-being of all personnel.

We intend to continue this trend. Indeed, we must.

Mr. President,

I wish to express our appreciation and gratitude to the Executive Director and senior management of UN Women for their timely and sensitive response to the COVID-19 pandemic and for making the well-being of UN Women personnel their TOP priority.

In particular, the progressive measures and “maximum flexibility” approach backed by UN Women’s leadership that enabled our colleagues, including working parents and care givers, to avail of flexible working arrangements was a welcome step towards attempting to create work-life balance during a year-long period of crisis. We also appreciate the emphasis that UN Women has placed on improving access to mental health services for personnel, as around the world and across sectors, we hear about the growing mental health effects of COVID-19.

While UN Women’s leadership and response has been commendable in response to this protracted crisis, we are hearing that **more needs to be done**. UN Women personnel have continued to express their **concerns about increased workloads during this global pandemic**. We hear that the implementation of the flexible working arrangements offered by the organisation has been uneven across different teams. Flexible working arrangements cannot translate to longer and more working hours at a time when care responsibilities have burgeoned, support systems have dwindled or collapsed, and isolation, loss and pandemic stress is depleting us, as lockdowns persist in many parts of the world. **More needs to be done to ensure consistent implementation of these measures, across UN Women, at all levels, and to both support managers as well as hold them accountable.**

For our colleagues, especially working parents and caregivers, flexible work arrangements and work-life balance are not a matter of benevolence, they are a matter of survival. They are about the sustainability of our work force and long-term health impacts. They are about our rights.

We urge UN Women to continue meaningful conversations with managers and the work force to find solutions that safeguard the health, well-being, talent and morale of all its personnel, regardless of their contractual status. Investing in and paying more attention **to work-life balance and mental health** should continue to be **the top priority** for UN Women’s executive leadership going forward and must be modelled from the very top of the organization, by the Executive Director and the Deputy Executive Directors.

And UN Women must lead the UN system in its gender-responsive approach to the crisis. We, as the Staff Council, have been working steadfastly with our management throughout this difficult time, contributing via various working groups and task forces set up to discuss safety and well-being measures in the context of COVID-19, return to work guidelines and future of work deliberations. We have continued to provide tailored support to individual personnel who shared their challenges with us. We have also met regularly with our Executive Director and Deputy Executive Director and the head of HR, to raise concerns and put forward recommendations, and are committed to ensuring UN Women’s standard setting response to this crisis.

We request your leadership, as Member States, to support and insist upon progressive and people-centered measures that protect the UN workforce, and enable our colleagues and their families in the UN system to emerge from this pandemic and build back better.

Another issue that concerns personnel is the future of work and return to work modalities.

It’s still an uphill battle to curb the spread of the virus in many countries and **we are particularly concerned about access to vaccines for our colleagues in duty stations with weak health systems and welcome the UN system’s efforts in this regard.**

Excellencies, to adopt and implement progressive, relevant, forward-looking and feminist work environment, UN Women and the UN system will need your support and endorsement.

In the meantime, we appreciate and urge regular and timely updates to be shared with all personnel about return-to-work arrangements.

Excellencies, it has been eight months since the murder of George Floyd in the United States of America that sparked world-wide organizing against systemic racism. In response to the UN Secretary-General's call for a year of dialogue to be united against racism.

We welcome and fully support UN Women's commitment to creating a workplace that promotes the **dignity and respect** of all and for the ongoing work on **anti-racism and discrimination**. This is imperative so we can truly embody the values enshrined in the UN charter. UN Women, as the agency in the UN system tasked with eradicating gender-based discrimination, must be at the forefront of efforts to eradicate racism and all other types of discrimination within its own family. There are many lessons to learn from the fight for gender equality and UN Women is best positioned to lead the way.

We are heartened by the steps taken by UN Women to date. We commend the Executive Director's Let's Talk About Race series, the Young Women Leaders Initiative for young women from the global South and the recent appointment of a Diversity, Inclusion and Shared Leadership Advisor, who we look forward to working closely with in the months ahead.

We call on UN Women to collect and publish and track over time hard data that can reveal the gaps in our workforce with regard to which groups are not represented or are under-represented. We need to know who we are before we can decide who we want to be. Equally important, we must find ways to hear the daily discriminations and humiliations that colleagues face, collect soft, qualitative data that can help us ascertain the steps we need to take to create a nurturing and respectful environment for all.

As part of this work, we need to address negative perceptions of **recruitment processes**, which are often described by personnel as not providing equal opportunities to all. Personnel point to discriminations, explicit or implicit bias based on gender, age, class, ability, sexuality, North-South geographical representation, and double standards in recruitment and career growth prospects. **Building truly inclusive workplaces requires a long-term approach and is everyone's shared responsibility.**

We need skilled leadership and concrete actions to address this, redress the current imbalances in our work force and achieve balanced representation of presently marginalized groups. And we count your support to UN Women for initiating and seeing through a process of culture change that will ensure dignity and respect for all UN Women colleagues and truly leave no one behind.

Lastly, we continuously urge for the harmonization of contract modalities in the UN and in our agencies and a unified approach in respect to the ICSC modalities, which will also support interagency mobility. Our Staff Council and the personnel from all four agencies are represented by the UNISERV Federation, and we share concerns about the lack of a "One UN" approach. We advocated for, and welcome the newly established ICSC Commission's working group to review the implementation of the current contractual framework by the organizations and any possible improvements within the current framework (as requested by General Assembly

resolution 75/245). The working group will make recommendations on any possible improvements within the current framework, as needed, in its report to the Commission at its ninety-second session. We are encouraged by our organizations' support in this.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our lives, the way we work, how we socialize, and so much more. It's still an uphill battle to curb the spread of the virus in many countries. We are reaching into the deep coffers of our patience and resilience until the vaccine is available for all. We are determined to win the fight against COVID-19, and against gender inequality – an equally potent and deadly disease.

We count on your support to ensure the rights and well-being of all UN Women personnel, as they are the biggest potential we have as the United Nations, to win these fights, innovate and reach for an equal and sustainable future for all.

Mr. President, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address the Executive Board.