

My Participation on the Town Hall Meeting of Civil Society and United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres

Leave no one behind and no one offline!



GENERAL ASSEMBLY HALL

On March 13, 2023, I reached the UN Headquarters at 8:30 am. I found some like-minded people during this period at Café Vienna and we spoke on various issues happening in the field of Food systems, Gender Equality, Education and Financing etc., Later, we headed towards the General Assembly Hall to attend the “TOWNHALL MEETING OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND UNITED NATIONS SECRETARY-GENERAL ANTÓNIO GUTERRES” side event which was moderated by UN Women Executive Director, Sima Sami Bahous. The physical townhall was open to representatives of ECOSOC-accredited NGOs registered for CSW67 and I am lucky that I got an opportunity to watch the UN Secretary General speaking in-person and up-close.

Madam Sima Sami Bahous spoke for a few minutes on how civil societies, private organizations must do their part of work w.r.t. to the theme of the UNCSW 67 i.e., “Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls” and how this meeting is prioritized by SG for civil society members and she gave the floor to Secretary General, Antonio Guterres.



TOWNHALL MEETING OF CIVIL SOCIETY – MEETING MODERATOR – MADAM SIMA BAHOUS



UN SG speaking initiating the talk

Secretary General started his speech by conveying that women everywhere has to do 10 times more work than men and that too without much recognition in this male-dominated world. Men love to make decisions and women pay the price. Pandemic not only effected this vulnerable part of gender by not only losing their jobs but also girls lost their chance for

education. Girls are facing a new kind of discrimination i.e., discrimination in digital technology. Even the medical decisions taken based on men's perspectives, damage women. AI will be shaping the world soon and without women, it will take longer time to achieve the SDGs.

Journalists, Activists and even democracy is sometimes attacked when it is associated with women and women are credited less for their achievements even when they have some potential as men. He stressed that the changes will not happen on its own and the glass ceilings have to shattered for some transformative changes to be seen. We must overhaul the patriarchal structure to perpetuate gender equality. He emphasized on the fact that we have to support women the most when there is crisis situations by preserving the human rights and supporting the efforts to eliminate gender discrimination.

UN tries to lead by example and he welcomes the women from the global south to invest in gender equality and SDGs. Their common agenda is mostly feminist based led by women and for women. Specific challenges on peacekeeping and conflict affected regions are very dramatical. Silicon Valley has become a Death Valley for women and girls UN 2.0 will work on "Leaving no one behind and no one offline" and together we must push back against human rights for women and girls around the world.



Q and A session

At about 10:30 am, the floor was then open for Q and A session. There were several speakers who expressed their comments and questions to the Secretary-General amongst them some were:

1. GBV happens both online and offline, then why are offline perpetrators not punished in the same way as other crimes? Why are mandates held without/with very less women in the in the decision-making rooms.

SG: There must be transparent accountability and member states needs to seriously consider when algorithms are based in such way. Nowadays, there is no accountability of women rights and harassments happening in social media and this need to be urgently addressed.

2. Is Youth leadership in the UN possible all the way up to the highest level? If yes, then when?

SG: There should be gender parity and the UN must concentrate on this. This is not only for young women but also young men to be included in the office.

3. What is United Nations doing to make youth engagement more easier along with providing digital safety in the online world? This speaker also faced visa issue which she related is due to age-bias.

SG: There should be more discussions on this issue as the youth are capable no doubt. He agreed there were visa issues for people coming from the global south. But he does not agree it was age factor, it is an understanding between the host country and UN.

4. What is UN doing to help those countries who are facing harassment and aggressions from strong countries like Russia towards Ukraine?

SG: He agrees with the fact that after the WWII, biggest refugee outflow is from Ukraine. According to the UN Charter Article 2 (4) - prohibits the threat or use of force and calls on all Members to respect the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence of other States. Russia has violated international law and UN is aware of the dramatic situation happening in Ukraine and concluded by saying that no action will go unpunished.

5. Women of Libya, Sudan and Niger representatives were asking for women rights negotiations for the people of Chad?

SG: He expresses his regret by saying that UN has not done enough for the people indigenous people.

6. Covid has exposed the fragile underbelly of the medical systems around the world. Transformative changes will happen when a woman knows there is safe space using her phone. There should be specific metrics and accountability to measure these changes and not just subjective monitoring.

SG: He answered this by saying violence is not a local question, but a global question. It is not possible to solve them in silos. Cyber violence in digital space is increasing and it should be solved by keeping the women in mind.

7. In Boko Haram, Nigeria women are not only left behind but left dead. Women are raped mercilessly and during latest elections, a woman was stabbed in her face. Women are

not cared and finances are stolen from her. Impunities and policies are not favorable. How is UNO helping these vulnerable women from the wrath of humanity she is facing in this country?

SG: He had visited the Boko Haram area during the month of Ramadan, and he says that some parts of this region has improved and other places it was a tragedy. His office had an intervention with the regional government, but the people locally need to be trained and this is of highest priority.

8. Women displacement, vanishing and trafficking are some of the major problems in Mexico. When there will be free internet be available everywhere and what after that?

SG: He understands her people's situation back in her country. If we consider the situation in Ukraine, there are femicide and bullying cases of Ukrainians by Russians and here Internet is directly used to harasses women. So also Internet or digitization is not a straightforward answer.

9. The last speaker asked the UNSG to give his comments on the Women's and girls' situation in Afghanistan.

SG: UN is urging the Taliban government and working on the humanitarian sector by allow the Afghani women to work. Taliban has some pre-set norms and stereotypes already established to women residing there and any excuse to that will not be accepted by this government. Apartheid is deeply rooted in Afghan society. When the UN humanitarian group initiated talks on this front, Taliban responds by saying that it is against their religion and Quran especially when UN questioned about the basic human rights for women. He concluded his talk by saying that it is shame to humanity that Afghan women must face this kind of situation.

I felt it is a bitter truth where the women of the 21st century must fight for basic human needs like education and survival. It made me realize when we complain about internet speed and whatnots, there are women whether in Ukraine, Boko Haram or Afghanistan, who are not even treated like "human beings!"

All the remaining questions were asked to be emailed to csw@unwomen.org with the subject line 'Questions to SG.' This session ended at 11:15 am.

- *Priyanka Prem Kumar, UIMF Member*