

Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock remarks to the High-level Panel on combatting and preventing sexual and gender-based violence in humanitarian crises at the ECOSOC-Humanitarian Affairs Segment

9 June 2020

As delivered

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to be here with you today to moderate this high-level panel on combatting and preventing sexual and gender-based violence.

I am joined by Ms. Ine Marie Eriksen Søreide, Norway's Foreign Affairs Minister who is a champion of women's and girl's empowerment and a tireless advocate against sexual and gender-based violence.

We are also joined by renowned author and activist, Ms. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who has written powerfully about the experiences of women and girls in her books, including *We Should all be Feminists*.

We are also joined by Ms. Elinor Raikes, Vice President and Head of Program Delivery, International Rescue Committee, and Ms. Christine Siesun, Sexual Violence Operations Manager from the International Committee of the Red Cross in South Sudan, and Ms. Fátima Shehu Imam, the Founder and Executive Director of the Rehabilitation Empowerment and Better Health Initiative in Nigeria – all of whom are working daily from operational and policy perspectives to prevent SGBV.

I also welcome my UN colleagues, Dr. Natalia Kanem, Executive Director UN Population Fund, Ms. Henrietta Fore, Executive Director UN Children's Fund, and Ms. Kelly Clements, the Deputy Commissioner for Refugees.

This is a time of great challenge.

COVID-19 has upended every sphere of our lives.

The virus has multiplied threats to human rights and dignity.

It has forced us to take a hard, and I hope, honest look, at inequalities and how we protect our most vulnerable.

COVID-19 threatens to reverse the progress we have made in advancing gender equality and women's rights.

Many women and girls have faced gender-based violence, including sexual violence, and sexual exploitation and abuse. In many places calls to hotlines have increased by 30-40 per cent since quarantine and lockdown measures were put in place.

This is also a moment of opportunity. To act fast and in unity, while there is global momentum to recover better from the pandemic.

We must pull together, to put girls and women at the centre of our efforts. Through a whole system approach working with local communities. Civil society. Governments. Regional organizations. Donors. Humanitarian and development organizations.

Not just specialists responsible for work on gender-based violence and responders.

Leaders, in particular, must engage with service providers gathering information and data on needs and priorities from community-based protection groups and women's groups.

There are a set of reasons why we must prioritise this at the moment.

It is not just that that 1 in 3 women will experience some form of physical or sexual violence in her lifetime, with the likelihood of that happening being worse if the woman has a disability.

What we are seeing is some of the ways in which COVID-19 is playing out are exacerbating gender-based violence.

So we must prioritize and fund services for survivors of all forms of gender-based violence, including sexual exploitation and abuse. And promote the leadership and meaningful participation of women in humanitarian decision-making, including in leadership levels in the humanitarian community.

We must address gender inequality, which is the underpinning driver of so many of the problems we have to address.

My office, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), is playing its part in mitigating, responding to and preventing gender-based violence in humanitarian emergencies.

We were very pleased to co-host in May last year, with the Government of Norway, the Oslo conference on ending Sexual and Gender-based violence, OCHA and our co-host are tracking progress made by Member States and organisations on hundreds of political, policy and practice commitments, and financial commitments, to collectively strengthen accountability for addressing gender-based violence. We hope to share these results at the General Assembly.

We are prioritizing gender equality and addressing gender-based violence in response to the pandemic, through the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19.

We are doing this because responding to gender-based violence reduces suffering and saves lives.

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