



Socialist International Women

SIXTY FIFTH COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN,
NEW YORK, 15 - 26 MARCH 2021

VISION STATEMENT

**EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION AND DECISION-MAKING IN
PUBLIC LIFE – KEY TO ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY
AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS**

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The Socialist International Women (SIW) warmly welcomes the 65th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW65) and remains strongly supportive of its vitally important role as a globally influential event entirely dedicated to the achievement of gender equality and the emancipation, protection and empowerment of women and girls worldwide. SIW is firmly committed to contributing effectively to this session and standing in solidarity with all participants who share similar values and its overall vision of a world where gender equality and fully realised women's rights are a concrete reality.

CSW65 is a unique opportunity for the UN, governments and NGOs to come together and focus on a range of crucially important topics and urgent issues affecting women. This year's priority theme of "Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls" is particularly important in the context of the unprecedented level of global turmoil which has touched the lives of all of us over the past year. Extreme climate events, political upheavals and on-going incidents of civil unrest have contributed to a general feeling of unease, while the devastating coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all citizens and dominated global public health, economic, social and political attention.

It is a distressing and inexcusable fact that in periods of chaos and uncertainty, women suffer more severely and in greater numbers than men. This reality is without doubt perpetuated by a patriarchal legacy where women remain acutely under-represented on the elite leadership stage. Women's absence from many decision-making processes has allowed many significant gender inequalities to remain un-challenged. At this crisis point in our global history major decisions are being made by governments extremely rapidly. It is therefore critical to the achievement of gender equality that women are fully enabled and promoted as influential agents in these decisions to ensure gender sensitivity is a priority consideration both now and into the future.

SIW holds the vision of women being able to make their own decisions about their education, healthcare, property and finances and choose their own paths in life enjoying the same freedoms, rights, and opportunities as men. SIW firmly maintains that an essential key to achieving this is the radically increased meaningful participation of women in political and elite decision-making processes. SIW strongly believes that women's active and influential engagement in all forms of governance is a fundamental right, not an optional favour to be granted by men following insistent requests.

There are encouraging successes on this issue in some regions, but there remain significant challenges in many others which still require our firm solidarity and tenacious efforts to overcome. As cultures and social norms vary widely from region to region there is no single blueprint to facilitating change. However, we can learn from each other, support each other and work together to create workable solutions which eliminate barriers to women's ability to become effective co-governors alongside men. In some cases solutions may be relevantly simple, such as providing childcare facilities within parliamentary buildings. In others, there may be a need for far more fundamental changes in local cultural attitudes towards women and their role in society. Together women can do this, and collectively both women and men have a humanitarian duty to support each other in achieving this gender equality goal.

SIW remains a firm advocate of parity representation where women and men share decision-making power equally, in alignment with the recommendations of the Beijing Platform for Action 1995 and the UN SDG5.5: "Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life". SIW strongly asserts that a balanced participation of men and women in decision-making is a precondition for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls and must therefore be a consistent priority for government decision-making processes all over the world.

At present women remain severely under-represented in governance at all levels. As of 1 January 2017, only 7.2 per cent of heads of State, 5.7 per cent of heads of government and 23.3 per cent of members of parliament were women¹. Even in 2020 the latest available data shows that worldwide women are represented in only 25 per cent of national parliaments and 36 per cent of local government bodies². Clearly, there is still much work to be done by all governments and local communities worldwide - and quickly - to achieve our vision of global gender equality by 2030.

To create meaningful change within wider civic society gender equality must be evident across areas such as senior leadership within commercial businesses and policies such as equal pay for equal work to create a consistent gender equality narrative. In addition, there is an urgent need to increase gender equality regulation requirements for media organisations in order to challenge and penalise instances of misogyny, sexism and gender insensitivity. Other initiatives which can further embed the gender equality message could include initiatives such as provision of culturally appropriate advocates for women at police stations during gender and sexual violence investigation processes. The fact is that there are multiple possible ways to promote gender equality, including legislation, policy and regulation, but what is often lacking is the political imperative to give these mechanisms the 'teeth' required to create tangible change. This is not acceptable and is precisely why it is vitally important to radically increase women's political representation at all levels.

There are a number of proactive initiatives which can promote women into political positions, such as political parties themselves introducing quotas for female candidates in their selection processes. Interventions like this have been successful in some regions and have increased overall diversity. However, one of the biggest challenges to women's political participation, both prior to election and once in post, is threats and acts of violence. Violence against women in general is at alarmingly high levels worldwide, and sadly our current global issues have seen this menace escalate even further. For female politicians who are in the spotlight these threats and acts of violence can be highly personalised, brutal and sadly sometimes lethal. An Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU 2016) study into 'Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians' found 81.8 per cent had been subjected to some form of psychological violence and 44.4 per cent had been threatened with death, rape, beatings or abduction³. Violence against women in politics violates not only women's human rights, it is an attack on the most basic principles of social democracy. It is gender discrimination which infringes on the ability of female parliamentarians to effectively represent their constituents⁵. The intended effect of this specific type of violence is to deter prospective female politicians, which is a blow against both gender equality and the creation of socially democratic, inclusive societies.

Although a number of governments have legal frameworks which outlaw violence against women in general, many existing mechanisms are ineffectual in dealing with violence against female parliamentarians. For example, despite the clearly significant issues found in the IPU study (mentioned above), only 35.8 per cent of the parliaments participating in the study had a policy specifically on acts of intimidation against members of parliament and only four specially mentioned sexist remarks and sexual harassment⁴. As a matter of urgency, more emphasis on firmly eradicating violence against female political figures is needed from all governments worldwide. Meaningful gender equality can only become a reality when women can both stand for political office and carry out their elected duties without fear of gendered violence and abuse.

SIW asserts there is an urgent and critical imperative for all governments to strongly address all issues of violence against women and the specific issue of violence against female political figures and elite decision-making office holders in general.

Another key challenge to women participating in decision-making is their perceived status and freedoms within their communities. One aspect is that across all cultures women remain the predominant care givers for both children and extended family members, and often also the principle farmers and gatherers of food and water in rural environments. The result is that millions of women are time-poor and mostly housebound allowing few opportunities to participate in leadership and decision making events. As women are also predominantly amongst the poorest, worst educated and least independent financially, many have no political knowledge or influence whatsoever. Patriarchal cultures in particular often fiercely reject any change in female roles, especially anything involving increases in women's power and independence. Changing these views has proven to be extremely challenging in many cases. However, local social initiatives, such as free or subsidised childcare and any form of women's networking can help enormously in many ways. They can free women to think for themselves and collaborate, are powerful demonstrations to wider society that the status quo is shifting and are valuable, potent messages of hope for all of our sisters worldwide.

In terms of creating future decision-makers, for young girls a good quality education is a vitally important part of ensuring that they are equipped with the skills they need to enter the leadership and political pipelines that lead to meaningful influence at elite levels. Building the self confidence of young women, demonstrating that their voices, opinions, skills and knowledge are highly valuable and that they deserve an equal place in decision-making are essential to promoting gender equal cultures. Raising the aspirations of young girls so that they see themselves as potential future leaders within business, their communities and nations helps to lift the aspirations and hopes of all women. It also demonstrates gender equality as a natural aspect of society to young boys which is a vital key to creating gender equal societies in the future. For example, in communities which run men's engagement programmes men's attitudes towards women's decision-making roles in the home has been shown to improve dramatically⁶. In this way women and men can learn to work together to achieve lasting cooperative relationships and peaceful, sustainable communities to the benefit of our entire global family.

It is notable that one persistent barrier to the promotion of gender equality is a lack of relevant data on many gender specific issues. In some cases the data exists, but is not sex-disaggregated, while in other cases relevant data is not gathered at all. More hard data on gender specific inadequacies would greatly support the valid arguments for gender sensitive interventions, services and funding. It is therefore critical that gender relevant data gathering is routinely carried out by governments and institutions and that data is consistently sex-disaggregated.

Sadly, as a direct result of populist movements, there have been waves of backlash against progressive gender equality initiatives. It is vitally important that we do not lose hard-won gains, continue to strongly challenge reversals and push forward the gender equality agenda in all areas of public and private life. We are now at a decisive moment in the women's movement with proven power and momentum. It is imperative for all of us to pull even closer together in solidarity to ensure the global collective voice of women is heard and acted upon.

SIW applauds all women and girls everywhere who are standing up for gender equality and contributing to the continuing struggle of the global women's movement to make gender equality a daily reality for women and girls worldwide. The strength, intelligence, creativity, wisdom and leadership qualities of women and girls are visible in all areas of life. All women deserve to be congratulated and celebrated for nourishing and supporting their families and communities and contributing to peace and stability within their regions.

SIW reasserts that there is an urgent need for governments to strongly reaffirm their commitment to rapid progress on increasing the participation of women in decision-making processes at all levels of governance, gender equality in general, and on the urgent issue of eliminating violence

against women in all its forms.

SIW calls upon all its members, NGOs and groups affiliated to Socialist International to come together in firm solidarity to accelerate the realisation of a gender equal global community which respects and protects all its citizens.

In support of increasing the focus of all parties and governments on improving gendered inclusiveness in all aspects of decision-making and eliminating violence against women SIW calls on its members, all Socialist International members and affiliated groups to:

- Reinforce the principles of women's human rights to promote and establish gender equal participation practices within all local and national government decision-making processes.
- Initiate gender specific sex-disaggregated data gathering, measurements and goals as normative processes which recognise the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls.
- Insist on radical improvements in legislation and policies to provide adequate and fit for purpose protection from all forms of violence against women and specifically for female political figures and female elite decision-makers.
- Challenge accepted social norms which ignore, marginalise or exclude the rights of women and girls including issues of access to education, gender specific healthcare and social protections.
- Educate and inform all ages of women and men on the invaluable contribution of women and girls and their gender equal rights to equal participation in all decision-making processes.

COVID-19 AND THE IMPACT THIS HAS HAD ON WOMEN AND GENDER EQUALITY

The current coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic is the biggest single threat to global human health in over a century. There is no doubt that it will take many years to fully recover from the already devastating impact of this disease on populations and economies across the world. At this time of extreme distress and disruption it is vital that we stand together in solidarity and proactive humanitarian cooperation to protect and support each other, and in particular the most vulnerable groups within our communities, including women and girls.

SIW is deeply concerned that women and girls have been suffering disproportionately during this pandemic and asserts that it is imperative for all governments to ensure that gender sensitive policies and allocations of funding provide appropriately gendered responses during this exceptionally challenging period of the COVID-19 pandemic and into our future recovery.

Pandemics are never gender neutral in their impact. The COVID-19 pandemic has already negatively affected women and girls disproportionately to men. Women were more likely to be extremely vulnerable socially and economically before the pandemic, the pandemic has simply highlighted and exposed existing gender inequalities and gaps in social care and protection. Going forward, it is vital that data on the specific impacts of the pandemic on women and girls are recorded to ensure allocations of funding and resources to mitigate these effects are sufficient and implemented in a manner which is fit for purpose within the daily lives of those who need it.

One of the biggest impacts for women during the pandemic has been the necessary introduction of limitations on free movement such as curfews and lockdowns. Sadly, it is a known fact that the combination of stressful situations and confined spaces are highly likely to result in increased levels of domestic violence. This has resulted in women being trapped with their abusers, isolated and cut off from support mechanisms and escape routes. Where help is available, in some regions calls to domestic abuse helplines have increased up to 33 per cent since pandemic lockdowns started⁷. Despite this obvious and urgent need for support, funding has actually been cut to

women's helplines, crisis centres and shelters in several regions⁸. This is making it impossible for some organisations to continue their desperately needed work. The damage caused by domestic abuse rips through families and has long-term repercussions for both individuals and the wider community. It is vital that this deeply distressing issue is urgently addressed. While a few regions are beginning to respond appropriately, it is essential that all governments allocate sufficient funding and resources to support all victims of gender based violence and in particular victims of domestic violence.

The impact of shutdowns has also disproportionately affected women economically as many of the industries most severely affected generally employed a far higher number of women than men. Hospitality, tourism, retail, wellbeing services such as beauty and hairdressing, cleaning and domestic services have all been severely affected across several regions. Women also tend to be in lower paid part-time work, often in order to juggle carer responsibilities, so generally have lower overall incomes and less in savings. To make matters worse, an estimated 740 million women work in the informal economy which saw a 60 per cent income fall in the first month of the pandemic⁹. For most of these women there was no support at all if they could not work. Even with formal jobs, some offered little or no support, such as zero hours contracts with no employee benefits, or had entirely self-employed status. With the majority of single parent households headed by women, without appropriate social support and protection many families have quickly fallen into acute poverty. As it is currently predicted that people living in extreme poverty will increase by 96 million in 2021¹⁰, it is vitally urgent that women and their dependants are supported both financially and in immediately practical ways – such as free food parcels and female hygiene products – as a critical priority.

Even in gender progressive societies women remain the primary un-paid care givers for children, the elderly and infirm. With widespread school and nursery closures this has put a significantly increased burden on mainly women, in some cases while also continuing to perform their paid work roles. In paid carer work, globally women perform 70 per cent of health and social care roles, such as in care homes and as nurses and other medical staff¹¹. This not only puts more women at increased risk of psychological and physical distress, it also increases their risk of contracting COVID-19. For many, despite the risks of infection, there is an economic necessity for them to keep working. It is vital that their increased risk is recognised and appropriate levels of funding and resources are consistently allocated to these groups and their dependants.

Sadly, in the midst of this pandemic, natural disasters including earthquakes in Turkey and Greece in October and hurricanes and torrential rains which hit several regions in Central and South America and the Caribbean in November have also disastrously affected local economies and infrastructure. Once again, the impact on women – including severe disruption to life-essential support such as maternal and reproductive health services – on top of all the issues presented by the pandemic, has resulted in disproportionate profound suffering for women and their dependants.

While women remain severely under-represented at elite levels of decision-making there is a very real risk that gender equality issues will regress in importance and become pushed even further down the political agenda, particularly in regard to the allocation of funds. This must not go unchallenged. SIW asserts that it is vital that the entire social democratic family stands together in firm solidarity to highlight the specific urgent issues of women and girls during this pandemic to all governmental bodies worldwide. It is imperative that gender sensitivity is a primary consideration in all decisions made regarding the current and future effects of this pandemic to ensure that as a global community we remain firmly on track to achieve the vision of global gender equality by 2030.

To this end, the Socialist International Women calls on all Socialist International members, NGO's with similar values and all governments to:

- Stand in solidarity with all women and girls worldwide during this unprecedented time of crisis and into our future recovery and commit to addressing the critical issues facing women and girls.
- Evaluate the full impact COVID-19 is having on women and girls - including the gathering of relevant sex-disaggregated data - and put forward clear, concise and effective recommendations on how to mitigate the impact, including specific funding targets.
- Formulate and implement a post-COVID-19 recovery strategy that includes short-term and long-term gender-sensitive policies which governments can implement in their countries, ensuring interventions are fit for purpose within the daily lives of women and girls.

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