

Council discusses causes of violence and discrimination against women

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Exclusion of women in political transitions

Tunisia was one of the States visited by the Working Group in the course of the last year. While Tunisia itself stressed that the freedom following the revolution had strengthened the position of women, the experts found that this 'freedom' had opened up the space for highly polarised views on women's position in society. Although Tunisia has historically been one of the more progressive States in the region, this polarised national debate has left women fearful of losing those gains.

Spain, Mexico, and Nigeria agreed that political transitions do provide an opportunity for States to move forwards on equal representation for women, but, along with Finland, shared the concern that often women are excluded from those processes, even though, as Spain noted, they have often been fully involved in the fight to establish democracy. Going through its own transition, Egypt noted the challenge of directing the positive developments in the country to enhance the role of women in the decision-making process.

Violence against women human rights defenders

The stigmatisation of women human rights defenders has added to the fear of women in Tunisia of exclusion from political participation. The Working Group pointed in general to harassment and attacks on women human rights defenders as a key obstacle to the full representation of women in decision-making positions. When women's civil society organisations flourish, the experts said, they enable collective action by women to overcome the structural barriers they face.

The Working Group noted that national human rights institutions could potentially have a critical role to play in this respect, but that there are currently no international standards to guide NHRIs in how to integrate women's and gender issues into their work.

The impact of stereotyping on violence and discrimination

The issue of violence against women was also addressed in the report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Ms Rashida Manjoo, as well as in the annual day on women's rights. While many States emphasised policy and legislative measures they had taken to combat violence, there was a call from panellists to move beyond this towards implementation and a focus on underlying causes, including cultural systems and stereotyping.

The Working Group on discrimination against women also noted that stereotypes of women's capacities in politics contribute to women's marginalisation in politics (and are therefore often responsible for the harassment and attacks women often face in political positions).

Ms Fatma Khafagy, Ombudsman for Gender Equality in Egypt, spoke of how dialogue with religious leaders had contributed to stopping the practice of female genital mutilation in Egypt. She emphasised in particular the importance of having men involved in the fight against FGM. Juan Carlos Areán, member of the Secretary-General's Network of Men Leaders also said that it was important to stop seeing men as the problem and start involving them in the solution.

Ms Manjoo, speaking both during the presentation of her report and during the all-day discussion, stressed the need to focus on establishing standards of due diligence for States with respect to domestic violence that enable responsibility to be assigned for actions omitted, as well as those carried out. A full analysis of what constitutes due diligence on the part of a State would help also in securing accountability for violence against women. She pointed out that stereotyping often influences how cases of violence against women are handled by the judicial system and that due diligence on the part of States requires that remedies should subvert patterns of gender hierarchies, systemic marginalisation and structural inequalities.

The need for a coordinated approach

The existence of many different experts and bodies working on women's rights, including the Working Group on discrimination against women, the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the Commission on the Status of Women, and UN Women, raised concern amongst some about overlap and lack of coordination. The Chair of the Working Group responded to this point, stressing the active intention of the Working Group not to duplicate, nor to undermine or contradict the work of these bodies, but to develop strong and mutually reinforcing relationships. Strengthening interactions with regional mechanisms, including the newer regional human rights bodies, is one priority in this regard.

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