

## **International Women's Day 2023**

### **A new sense of urgency: global and regional women's human rights experts call on all actors to unite to preserve hard-fought gains and combat rollbacks**

On the occasion of International Women's Day 2023, we seize this opportunity to raise our collective voice as the members of the [EDVAW Platform](#) (*Independent Expert Mechanisms on Discrimination and Violence against Women*) undersigned below against the growing backlash against women's and girls' rights in all spheres of life. Global progress towards gender equality has slowed down across regions as a result of the pandemic and targeted rollbacks of women's and girls' rights, which have intensified. The UN estimates, at this rate, it could take nearly 300 years to achieve gender equality. This projection has been rising each year and should compel governments and decision-makers to examine their own accountability for ensuring the basic human rights and advancement of half of humanity.

#### ***Alarming trends identified***

The reliance of anti-rights actors on the systematic regression of women's rights as a political tool is more perceptible than ever. In our role as global and regional human rights mechanisms, we have witnessed a sharp increase in violations of the rights of women and girls on account of severely restrictive policies that strip women and girls of their autonomy, mobility, education, livelihood, and freedom of expression. In some parts of the world, the revocation of established legal protections combined with the dismantling of institutions established to tackle gender-based discrimination and violence against women and girls has left them with minimal or no protection from widespread repression and abuse.

In some countries, women and girls are still punished for claiming their sexual and reproductive rights, bodily agency, and freedom of opinion and belief. The criminalization of behaviours attributed only to women is inherently discriminatory as is denying women's autonomous decision-making and access to services that only they need and failing to address their specific health and safety concerns, including their sexual and reproductive health needs.

We are also deeply concerned about the violent crackdowns on women who publicly demand their rights and protesters, the systematic attacks and targeting of women and girls' human rights defenders and their families, both physically and through online violence. Such attacks often rely on sexual harassment and gender-based violence as a tool to discourage opposing views and appeals for transparency and accountability by States and non-State actors alike, and to stop women and girls from advocating for their rights, and rights of their communities, and from participating fully in public life.

Gender regressions threaten the hard-fought gains achieved over past decades and affect societies as a whole. Women and girls also experience multi-layered and intersectional discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, migration status, religion, or living in poverty, among other conditions. These compounded forms of inequality have not only exacerbated the global pushbacks against half the world's population, but they have further deepened social divisions and the suffering of those already in situations of vulnerability. It is imperative to

recall gender equality is a foundation to achieve sustainable development and lasting peace for all.

Opponents of women's rights are highly organized and anti-women's rights movements have tactically resisted policies and constructive debates on issues of scientifically based comprehensive sexuality education in schools, women's sexual and reproductive health rights, marriage equality and even gender-based violence. We have also observed how the term "gender" has been challenged, misunderstood, misconstrued and misused to undermine efforts to eliminate discrimination and violence against women and girls, in all their diversity, and to thwart progress towards gender equality. While such attacks contributed to the unprecedented withdrawal of a country from the Istanbul Convention, and were employed to encourage others to pursue a similar path, the Convention received three new ratifications in 2022, which is commendable. This exposes the limited impact of disinformation campaigns and should give us pause to celebrate.

The international and regional legal frameworks that we have are strong and women's human rights mechanisms continue to provide critical guidance to ensure that they are implemented. International and regional instruments such as CEDAW (*Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*), the Belém do Pará Convention, the Maputo Protocol and the Istanbul Convention link the eradication of discrimination and violence against women with the need to address negative stereotypes and behaviours which sustain and legitimise inequality between women and men and violence against women and girls. In this context, in 2022, the EDVAW Platform, in its first thematic paper on the digital dimension of violence against women, recalled the need to build "*strategies to address the proliferation of negative stereotypes against women and anti-women's rights rhetoric online which legitimize and sustain the digital dimension of violence against women.*"

### ***Call for a unified and collective approach towards transformative change***

Women and girls are drivers of solutions and inspiring leaders across generations and continents. As courageous agents of change and decision-makers, they focus on improving livelihoods for everyone, empowering others, and ensuring sustainable development and peace. Women and girls are on the front lines of climate activism, confronting global crises. They demand a more just and equal world not only for themselves, but also for future generations.

We remind States and all actors that women's and girls' human rights are fundamental human rights that cannot be rendered subordinate or denied based on selective interpretations of culture and religions, or for the sake of political expediency. More than ever, we, as the international human rights community, must unite to preserve the democratic space and block any position in the international human rights fora that endorses, perpetuates or is compliant with discriminatory norms, misusing culture, religion, and State sovereignty as justifications. Finally, keeping in mind the interdependence of all human rights and equal dignity of all human beings, States and other actors should not resort to picking and choosing whose rights to support and whose rights to oppose, as all universal human rights are entitlements of all persons.

### **The Commitment by members of the EDVAW Platform:**

Since its inception, the EDVAW Platform has focused on upholding international human rights standards achieved for women and girls worldwide, reminding States of their international obligations, resisting rollbacks and calling for accountability. In 2019, the Platform stressed:

*To move towards a faster progress, increased support is needed for the work of independent UN and regional mechanisms on violence against women and women's rights in order for them to forcefully push back against the pushbacks which are blocking and slowing down progress in the elimination of structural discrimination, gender-based violence against women, harmful gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms based on historically unequal power relations between women and men.*

Our collective voice grows even stronger and more resolute today, in March 2023, the year marking the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, and the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Maputo Protocol.

### **Responding to the ongoing epidemic of gender-based discrimination and violence and the systemic retrogression of the rights of women and girls, the members of the EDVAW Platform call on States to:**

- Increase support for women's and girls' human rights and resist rollbacks of their rights through effective legislative, executive, and judicial actions.
- Encourage stronger compliance with legal obligations under international and regional human rights instruments and commitments under Agenda 2030.
- Bolster regional human rights instruments and international human rights mechanisms that are essential for eliminating discrimination and violence and advancing gender equality.
- Prioritize a proactive political agenda and investments in the protection and advancement of women's and girls' rights and their equal participation in all spaces, including women and girls' human rights defenders and activists.

### **The following members of the EDVAW Platform expert mechanisms endorsed this statement:**

- **UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls (WGDAWG), Chair**
- **UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee)**
- **Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO)**
- **Committee of Experts of the Follow-up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention (MESECVI)**
- **African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa (A SRWHR)**
- **Inter-American Commission on Human Rights' Rapporteur on the Rights of Women (IA RWHR)**