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I am very pleased to join you today. I was privileged to work with the United Nations for more than three decades, devoting those exciting years to the promotion of human rights. It was an extraordinary journey, during which the world changed drastically, with the tense and divisive period of the cold war, the exciting years of openness and convergence of the late 90's and, more recently, with growing moments of political confrontation, populism, and a shrinking space for human rights.

1. Women's leadership from the start of the United Nations

The leadership and contribution of women to the human rights agenda have been an important reference for my work. Eleanor Roosevelt has been an inspiring figure - in her role as First Lady, as Delegate to the first UN Commission on Human Rights, and as Chair of the drafting group of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Her legacy is undeniable, and it is felt particularly present during this year of commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The truth is that the vision and the provisions of the Universal Declaration remain as relevant and influential as ever.

Eleanor Roosevelt was an influential figure, but certainly not the only one. Indeed, other extraordinary women left visible fingerprints on the human rights agenda and on the movement towards the advancement of women. Thanks to Hansa Mehta, Indian advocate for women rights, article 1 of the Universal Declaration became a landmark. She changed *one single word*... but what an ambitious and visionary change this was, replacing the proposed reference to “*all men*” by “*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.*”

Other women delegates made a real difference, making sure the Universal Declaration would recognize the “equal rights of men and women,” the equal rights in marriage,” and “the right to equal pay for equal work...”

2. Change takes time...

From the very start of the United Nations, women were trailblazers, and we continue to feel the lasting impact of their work in today's world. Unfortunately, women did not have a magic wand. And it takes time to translate their vision into reality... In fact, it took up to 1993 for the international community to recognize formally and unambiguously that “women's rights are human rights!” It was only in 2010 that UN Women was set up as the lead agency on gender equality and women's empowerment, replacing four different bodies through which the agenda was previously distributed. And still today, the path to the realization of women's rights remains challenging and bumpy.

Afghanistan is an extreme and tragic case of *gender-apartheid*... It is a country where women are alive, but where they are not living! Yet, risks, prejudices and gender biased social norms persist in many other nations.

This is sadly captured by very recent studies. One of them shows that half of the world's people believe that men make better political leaders than women and are also better business executives.¹ Unfortunately, reality matches those perceptions... 2021 was the first year when women were represented in all parliaments in the world. Women hold only 22% of ministerial positions, barely reach 10% of heads of state, and remain underrepresented as diplomats and as mediators in peace negotiations. At the same time, research shows that their involvement is fundamental to strengthening and sustaining peace! Another study indicates that it will take more than 130 years to close the global gender gap...² And still another, stresses that, at the current pace, it will take 300 years to eliminate child marriage...³

This is a bleak reality. But it can be reversed. When there is strong political will, change happens! For instance, within the United Nations, following the launch of the 2017 system-wide strategy, gender parity has been gaining ground. In 2018, it was reached for the first time in Secretary General's Senior Management Group and, soon after, among Resident Coordinators. Progress has become apparent in most headquarters' locations and, step by step, continues to move ahead.

Despite these promising developments, we are not there yet! Much stronger efforts are needed to advance and consolidate these trends across regions and in the field.

3. Women's contribution to consensus building

In my work as Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children, I traveled around the world to support countries in their efforts to prevent and respond to all forms of violence against children. I have met extraordinary women whose determination and commitment were instrumental in advancing progress towards ending child abuse.

- A) I remember the strongminded Police Inspector General, in Tanzania, who made it a priority to break the silence around violence. She trained and appointed women as gender and children's advisers in police stations across the country to overcome the fear of child victims to report incidents of violence. As a result, complaints grew exponentially and the fight against impunity reached a new threshold.

- B) In an extremely poor and remote area of Malawi, I met a traditional local leader who was determined to bring an end to child marriage. Her work made a real difference! Over a few months, she annulled hundreds of child marriages. She adopted a by-law to prohibit

¹ Human Development Report 2023 – Breaking down gender biases: Shifting social norms towards gender equality <https://hdr.undp.org/content/2023-gender-social-norms-index-gsni#/indicies/GSNI>

² World Economic Forum, June 2023: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2023>

³ https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Is_an_End_to_Child_Marriage_Within_Reach-3.pdf

child marriage and determine the return to school of all children, especially girls, who had married before 18. She knew legislation was not enough to address this harmful practice. Thus, she launched a wide mobilization process to bring on board all relevant actors in her community: women, parents and mothers' groups, young representatives, religious leaders, local authorities, other traditional chiefs... Not less importantly, she mobilized the local registrars, who could be seriously fined if they insisted on celebrating any future marriage.

- C) In Solomon Island, I met a nun who refused to accept the serious cases of domestic violence affecting women and children. She built a safe house with a child-friendly space to rescue and protect those at risk. There was a lot of resistance because of the prevailing perception that men have the power to beat their wives and children. Incidents were concealed, victims were afraid of complaining and even the police were hesitant to intervene. Patiently, she rallied their support and promoted a legal aid system to bring cases to justice. And to avoid any backlash, she put in place a "family round table reconciliation" process for fathers to publicly apologize and commit to non-violence in the presence of the representatives from the community. Her successful initiative became a reference for subsequent developments in the country.
- D) As you know, children's exploitation through labour remains a global challenge and affects very young kids. Children work, often in clandestine and hazardous activities which compromise their health and education, while adults' unemployment remains spread. Well, when women are involved, this reality can change! This is what happened in southern India where mothers from poor castes benefited from microcredit initiatives. With the little loan they received, they started an income generating activity: they bought a cow, sold milk, produced cheese and other dairy products, and invested their savings in their households. This was critical for freeing children from labour and sending them back to school. Initiatives such as these became a milestone for global poverty eradication efforts.

4. Conclusion

It is often said that women have their feet on the ground and keep their mind in a far-reaching horizon. These few examples illustrate this well. They show how women's agency and leadership provide inspiring role models, encourage women's recognition and participation, rally the engagement of multiple stakeholders, and help to overcome prejudices and deeply rooted social conventions. This happens within multilateral organizations, and it happens across regions.

In today's world, as we face the impact of devastating health pandemics, natural disasters, a global food crisis, and conflicts and unprecedented forcibly displacement, women's participation and contribution to multilateralism is not only imperative, but more relevant than ever.