

'Power is not given, power is taken', UN chief tells women activists, urging push-back against status quo

"The central question of gender equality is a question of power", he stressed, noting that we continue to live in a male-dominated world with a male-dominated culture.

"Power is not given, power is taken", he stressed, adding that "we have to push back" against the resistance to change "because people do not like power being taken".

[Secretary-General António Guterres](#) (centre) holds townhall meeting in connection with the sixty-second session of the Commission on the Status of Women., by UN Photo/Mark Garten

"We will only be successful if we are able to combine the institutional approaches, like the ones the UN develops, with the approaches at the civil society [level], the grassroots movements and the public opinion in general", he elaborated.

In enumerating the UN's internal priorities, he listed the first as parity, telling the meeting that at the senior Under-Secretary-General (USG) and Assistant-Secretary-General (ASG) levels, "we are now at 53 per cent men and 47 per cent women, which means that we are in line to the commitment I made to reach full parity in senior management in 2021", he stated.

He added that while there are 26 women and 16 men in senior management, peacekeeping remains a male-dominated field. "We need to have probably a majority of women in headquarters" at the USG and ASG level, he said, "to compensate for what is still a minority in the field, but we are making progress very quickly", he explained.

Notwithstanding the progress at the top levels, where he can personally appoint women, he said he was aware of a "pushback" moving down the ranks. To remedy this, Mr. Guterres said he was encouraging all Member States to include gender as a criteria and vowed to keep pushing, adding that "the battle is enormous".

Ending impunity

Turning to sexual harassment, he flagged that the victims are predominantly women and girls "because of the power relations".

The Secretary-General said the main obstacle to introducing a zero-tolerance policy was the doubt people had over its effectiveness, pointing out that often "the victim becomes a double victim" instead of the perpetrators being punished.

To combat this, “we have done something revolutionary” he told the group: “We created a team of six women experts on sexual harassment investigations” where complaints bypass the old bureaucratic system and go straight to this team, “which might make some men think twice”. This second priority was greeted with a stirring round of applause.

Sexual exploitation perpetrated by UN staff against others, namely vulnerable populations, was the UN chief’s third priority.

While cases are reported in peacekeeping operations, they also come in from agencies working in humanitarian and development fields.

“It is important to have a prevention capacity and at the same time a solid capacity to fighting impunity”, he asserted, adding that progress is being made. Specifically he said the overwhelming majority of troop and police contributing countries “are signing a contract with us in relation to prevention, training and punishment”, in addition to around 60 heads of State and Government who are championing the cause.

Searching outward

Outside the Organization, the Secretary-General expressed concern that despite many movements underway to combat gender-based violence, “we are seeing that violence against women and girls in conflict situations is not improving”.

Five priorities of the Secretary-General

- Parity inside the Organization
- Zero tolerance for sexual harassment
- Ending sexual abuse by UN staff
- Prevent and punishing violence against women offenders
- Reversing the trends of undermining gender-based human rights

Combatting this violence, including in families, is what Mr. Guterres called his first “outside priority”.

He identified “a wide range” of ways to do this, from prevention to training and more effective court systems.

The second priority beyond the UN he said, concerned human rights violations, which he said was “very much linked to the pushback aspect.”

Mr. Guterres cited an uptick in the persecution of women human rights defenders, online hate speech, harassment and “vicious campaigns of the worse possible kind”.

“The hatred and prejudice” against “women emerging”, is also “a question of power”, he said, lamenting that legislation, reproductive rights and “even genital mutilation” are moving backwards.

In conjunction with governments and international organizations, civil society has an important role to play in shifting this.

“We need to push back against the pushback in relation to what is a difficult environment for the human rights universe related to the question of gender,” Mr. Guterres spelled out.

The human right agenda in several parts of the world is losing ground and “it is very important that we unite our efforts to reverse this trend”, concluded the Secretary-General.