

'The clear objective of our time is parity' rooted in women's empowerment – UN chief Guterres

17 March 2017 – Gender parity at all levels – political, cultural, economic and social – is a central objective and must be based on women's empowerment, Secretary-General António Guterres told women's rights activists and civil society representatives today during a town hall-style discussion at United Nations Headquarters in New York.

Parity is important in all areas of political and social life, said Mr. Guterres adding: "This is a battle [...] a struggle." Generally no one likes to lose positions they have long held, but the reality of gender parity is that many more women will be in positions that today are occupied by men. "But that's a good thing," he said, noting that in his experience, gender parity means better decision-making and better management.

Alongside UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, as well as Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed and his senior staff, Mr. Guterres set the stage for the end of the first week of the 61st Commission on the Status of Women, known as the largest inter-governmental forum on women's rights and gender equality. The theme this year is women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work.

The Secretary-General sought suggestions and opinions of the civil society representatives on how the UN can move forward on its commitments on gender equality. He opened the discussion by sharing life lessons on the issue, telling the gathering that during his time as Prime Minister of Portugal, one of his most difficult battles had been putting family values on the national agenda.

"There was kind of a national conspiracy to make sure that no one talked about it – from the police to the judiciary and public in general, it was as if the problem did not exist, but it was a very serious problem," he said, noting that much had to be done in those areas, including through legislation and broad based campaigns to put it on the agenda.

'The central question is empowerment at all levels'

Later, as UN High Commissioner for Refugees, he saw that women and children were the most vulnerable among those that fell under his agency's mandate. Indeed, women were "doubly vulnerable," and over his tenure, he learned that while international legal protections are important, "we live in a male-dominated world and a male-dominated culture, so the issue goes beyond protection: the central question is empowerment."

Indeed, without it, protection is not possible, he added.

The question of empowerment has many dimensions, one being to ensure that men and women are able, in parity, to assume their responsibilities at all levels; political, economic, social and cultural. And so, parity for us in the UN is a central objective, at the level of senior management, as well as the entire staff.

So this is a very central question, said the UN chief, inviting the enthusiastic audience to share their perspectives on ways to push the issue forward, in cooperation, not only as an objective regarding the rights of women but an objective in relation to the quality of our societies and the international community as a whole.

'Links with civil society are a way to improve governance, not limit government'

Responding to questions, Mr. Guterres acknowledged that there is a backlash today against many of the gains women have made over recent decades and we need to be very active in that regard in order to reverse this trend. But this is not only true of women's rights, there is also a backlash against civil society in general and in many dimensions of human rights.

Offering his take, the Secretary-General said: As societies become more complex, and as social media's [impact continues to grow] and governments feel less and less secure because they have less instruments of control, one of the attempts is to try to keep civil society under control [...] Limiting civil society space is a reaction to the feeling of governments that they are losing control of society.

Indeed he said this is apparent in many countries around the world, but the key is to ensure that governments understand that links with civil society are a way to improve governance, not limit the power of government.

I think we need to have a strong campaign to make sure that governments understand that working with civil society is the best way to rule a country, and that they understand that the UN needs to apply the same procedures within its work, because what is true at the national level in relation to the quality of democracy is also true at the global level in relation to the governance of democratic institutions.