



JOINT MESSAGE ON INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

8 MARCH 2021

In 1948, humanity proclaimed its adherence to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through a bold vision of making men and women equal before the law, employment, education and health for a more just, free and equitable society.

Since 1975, the celebration of International Women's Day on 8 March has become a tradition.

Every year, the whole world celebrates this day in order to build a world where men and women work together as partners to bring about change.

This day brings us to take stock of the progress and obstacles encountered in achieving gender equality goals around the world.

The theme chosen for 8 March 2021 by the United Nations is "**Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world**".

This theme complements that of the 65th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW65) "*Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls*".

Based on this universal vision of the advancement of women's rights and the themes proposed to us this year by the United Nations, it seems opportune to use the commemoration of this International Women's Day to highlight the commitments made and to accelerate the establishment of gender equality, women's leadership in order to offer the women and girls of our region the full enjoyment of their rights, especially in this difficult period of COVID-19.

According to the various studies conducted on gender inequality in the face of the health crisis caused by the pandemic, it appears that women have played a key role in relation to the disproportionate burden they bear.

As the primary caretakers of their families, this status puts them at the forefront of the response to the pandemic as home-based care providers, health professionals and, in some cases, as leaders of their communities and countries.

As a result, they are at high risk of infection and/or death, as they are still not in possession of adequate protective equipment and materials.

Because of the confinement, there has been a marked increase in domestic violence, particularly gender-based violence, characterised by rape and sexual abuse of which women and girls are the primary victims.

In the absence of appropriate structures to accommodate them, these victims have found themselves prisoners, forced to live with their executioner under the same roof, despite the risks they run.

This untenable situation calls for urgent actions to be taken and implemented together to continue to protect communities, especially women and girls whose homes are no longer safe places to take refuge.

The majority of women in the region work in the informal sector, do domestic chores and hold menial jobs because they are low-skilled. As a result, they have little or no income.

Limited access to masks, drinking water for hand washing and health care is a major challenge in most countries, especially in rural areas and in refugee and displaced persons camps, which requires special regional attention.

The specific needs of women and girls need to be integrated into the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes in all sectors and at all levels for prevention, control and care.

In view of the above, the Office of the UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), whose Agenda for Women, Peace and Security, gender equality and women's empowerment are integral parts of their main strategies to promote peace and stability, security and development in the region, call on member States to make gender equality in the world of work a reality, indeed an imperative for sustainable development, since the empowerment of women and girls in this globalizing world equals the empowerment of men and families as well.

Improving the status of women must be our everyday struggle.

This implies that our States must respect the commitments made in favour of gender equality and translate them into concrete actions, because we cannot claim to make peace, ensure security and development by hiding a non-negligible part of the population.

The regional women want to see things evolve, move, change.

The objective is to eliminate the barriers that hinder women's emancipation in order to promote more equitable and inclusive development.

We need to :

- Involve women in the National Coordination Mechanisms for coordinating actions to prevent and combat the pandemic at the community, peripheral and central levels;
- Implement economic and social policies that address gender issues and integrate the contribution of women and women's organisations at the heart of the response to the pandemic by COVID19 ;
- Take measures to provide essential social protection for those in the informal sector;
- Integrate Sexual and Reproductive Health services and the prevention and response to violence against women into national action plans to combat the pandemic;
- Ensure the economic recovery of vulnerable groups affected by COVID-19, especially groups in which women and the disabled are strongly represented for an inclusive economic recovery.